

Because I Trust You

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Isaac Lahey, Scott McCall (Teen Wolf), Stiles Stilinski, Derek Hale, Allison Argent, Lydia Martin, Vernon Boyd, Chris Argent, Melissa McCall, Peter Hale, Kira Yukimura, Malia Tate, Braeden (Teen Wolf), Kate Argent, Liam Dunbar, Mason Hewitt, Brett Talbot, Theo Raeken, Corey Bryant, Camden Lahey, Jordan Parrish, Gerard Argent, Tamora Monroe

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Part 1 of [Love Returned In Full](#)

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Because I Trust You

by [sunmoontruth](#)

Summary

It's such a simple phrase, but it means everything. All Isaac has ever wanted is to be trusted, and he is. Scott trusts him. Though, looking at him now, Isaac knows there's something Scott's not telling him.

It isn't just trust. It's more than that.

"You trust me?" Isaac asks. His voice is soft, almost teasing. The pieces are coming together now. Isaac is starting to get it.

—

A retelling of the *Teen Wolf* series where Isaac doesn't leave. Spans from season 3A to season 6B.

Notes

I do not own Teen Wolf! Some of the dialogue is taken directly from the show (I will credit the episode at the beginning of each chapter)

Biggest of thank yous to @overcaffeinatedinsomniac for helping me make decisions and listening to what is probably hours of voice memos talking about this fic <3

Tattoo

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 1

Word count: 3,378

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Isaac comes to consciousness with a shock. It's not a steady, gradual thing. The electricity pulses through him, bringing Isaac right up to the surface with no warning. He groans in pain, body convulsing and eyes flickering between gold and blue.

"Quiet," a girl Isaac has never met before hisses, peering over his body.

There's a burning sensation around Isaac's ribs. When he reaches down he feels torn fabric and wet blood. There's a large slash on Isaac's side that isn't healing. His head spins. He claws at the ground beside him, reaching for... reaching for something.

The girl helps Isaac get to his feet. Isaac feels fuzzy around the edges, like he's floating somewhere between sleep and wake. The girl pulls Isaac along, "Stay with me. We're almost there."

Isaac's head lolls to the side. The movement causes a stinging sensation to run up his spine to the base of his neck. Isaac reaches up to feel punctures at the back of his neck. "My neck..."

"From their claws," the girl says. "It's how they share memories."

"But I don't remember anything," Isaac says almost immediately, like an instinct. He hadn't fully realized it before, but it's true. He doesn't remember anything. The last thing he remembers was being at Derek's loft. *So how did he get here?*

"Also how they steal them. Listen to me, no matter what happens, you hold on, okay? You hold on tight."

The girl helps lift Isaac onto the motorcycle. Isaac tries to be helpful, but his body is too weak. It takes a moment of maneuvering to get

him steady, then the girl climbs on the front. She revs the engine and Isaac's grip around her waist tightens. They take off.

Isaac rests his head on the girl's back, fighting hard to stay awake. He may not remember what happened, but he knows that if he passes out again, they'll never make it out alive.

They manage a few blocks before Isaac picks up on a quiet sound coming from behind them. It's too soft for the human girl to hear, especially with the volume of the motorcycle engine to compete with. Isaac lifts his head to try to get a better listen.

"I hear something," Isaac says, sitting up fully. He focuses his wolf hearing as best he can in his incoherent state. Footsteps. "Someone's coming."

Isaac turns to look behind them as a figure appears out of the shadows. As it approaches them, the figure takes the shape of a man, silhouetted by the mist. Dread settles in Isaac's stomach. It's only a matter of moments before the man catches up to them, baring claws and fangs.

"Faster!" Isaac shouts desperately.

The girl speeds up. They gain a little bit of distance, but it's not enough. When Isaac turns his head in the other direction, the man is already there, ready to attack. The werewolf lunges at Isaac who ducks just in time to miss the impact. Instead, the claws collide with the back of the motorcycle once, twice. Then, with barely a second in between, the claws scrape up the opposite side of the motorcycle.

Isaac turns his head, an eerie feeling settling over him. This time he sees two figures.

"Two of them," Isaac informs the girl.

The twin werewolves continue to gain on them, one coming from each side. Each time they swing at Isaac, he dodges. Their claws continue to hit the motorcycle, making it increasingly difficult for them to stay balanced. The girl turns a sharp corner hoping to shake them, but werewolf superspeed is hard to compete with. One of the twins is already waiting for them on the other side. He claws the front of the motorcycle causing sparks to flash from the metal.

Isaac keeps his eyes behind them, watching for the twin's next move. He turns frontward just in time to see a giant truck coming right at

them. Isaac squints his eyes closed and flinches inward. He braces himself for impact. The truck horn blares, and, somehow, the girl manages to steer them around with only a hare's breath between them and the truck.

The girl pulls the motorcycle into an alley, as Isaac checks behind them for any sign of the twins. When Isaac looks forward again, they're barrelling right toward a brick wall.

Isaac shouts, "No!"

The girl steers the motorcycle to the side, and they skid to a stop just in time. When Isaac looks up, the twin shadows are looming in the distance like a symbol of death. Isaac and the girl are cornered. He can't see how they're going to get out of this.

The girl twists the motorcycle around to face the twins. She flips her visor helmet up. "Remember what I said before?"

"Hold on?"

"Hold on!" the girl shouts back. She slides the visor back into place and starts revving the engine. Isaac tightens his grip.

One of the twins runs at them, sliding down onto the ground in a kneeling position. When the other twin starts sprinting, the girl accelerates. She aims the motorcycle directly at the werewolves. The twin uses the other's back as a mount and leaps at them. For a moment, Isaac feels everything in slow motion. The twin is soaring through the air. The motorcycle isn't fast enough to make it out from under him. The twin is going to crash right into them, and there's nothing Isaac can do about it. His body is drained and he's not the one steering.

But then, at the very last moment, the girl cuts to the right. The twin hits the ground, fist coming down hard enough to fracture the pavement. Isaac nearly winces.

Isaac can hardly believe they survived, but they're not out of the woods yet. He turns to look ahead and sees a huge wall of windows. Isaac yells, "Wall!" but it's too late.

The collision hits hard. Glass shatters all around them. Isaac's exhausted body finally starts to give out. He tries to fight it, but there's nothing he can do. His vision blacks out. He tips forward. He loses all consciousness.

Isaac hits the ground violently, the impact pulling him back up from the blackness. He looks around, quickly trying to reorient himself. The first thing he looks for is the girl. He sees her taking off her helmet, and relief floods Isaac at the knowledge that she's alive, at least for now. Isaac's vision is blurry, but not so much that he can't see the twin silhouettes coming in through the shattered glass wall. Isaac struggles to try to move away, but his body is too weak. All he can really do is watch.

The twins tear their jackets off and, okay, that is a little odd, but Isaac also lives with Derek. So. Shirtless werewolves are certainly not the strangest thing he's ever seen. But then one of the twins crouches down and the other shoves his arm into his back. There's a sickening crunching of bones as they start merging together. Morbid curiosity and fear mix together inside Isaac forcing him completely still. He can't bring himself to look away.

This is definitely the strangest thing he's ever seen.

The mega werewolf roars with bright red eyes, and Isaac is startled back into action. He tries to squirm away, but he knows he's done for. Isaac can't outrun or out-fight this thing. He's going to die.

"Isaac! Get down!"

Fortunately for Isaac, the girl – he really needs to learn her name – survived the crash. Isaac plasters himself to the ground as the girl pulls a gun on the mega werewolf. Isaac stays dead still. He doesn't dare move until he hears the crackling of electricity and the alpha howling in pain. Isaac looks up, but he quickly has to shield his eyes from the flashing lights. The electricity is all but blinding. All Isaac can see is the vague shape of the merged body falling to the ground. When the lights are gone, so are the twins.

Beside him, the girl pants, "I thought I told you to hold on."

Isaac collapses in relief.

Isaac is the one that calls 911. The girl had tried to tell him not to, but when she immediately passed out, he had no other choice but to call for an ambulance. It's a bit of a mess because Isaac has no idea where they are, but, with a few key descriptors and the help of modern technology, the paramedics are able to find them.

Isaac has never been in an ambulance before. It's far less glamorous than he expected it to be. It's cramped and Isaac is practically

strapped to the stretcher. If Isaac was any less exhausted, he probably would have panicked by now. Luckily for the paramedics locked inside the vehicle with him, Isaac is completely depleted.

When they arrive at the hospital, Isaac does start to panic a little bit. He's hurt and tired, but he is going to heal. He's going to be okay, but the girl might not be. Fortunately, Melissa McCall recognizes him instantly.

"Hey, wait. Wait a minute. I know this one," Melissa says as she approaches Isaac's stretcher. She leans down close to him and asks, "What happened, Isaac?"

"Listen, the girl, all right. She's worse, okay?" Isaac says in a quiet rush. He needs someone else to know. He needs to pass the responsibility off into more capable hands.

"Are you not healing?" she asks.

Isaac grunts in pain, starting to feel a bit frantic. "I will, will you just please – would you just help her, *please*?"

"Okay, can you take him?" Melissa orders the EMT.

The paramedics start pushing Isaac deeper into the hospital, and he has no choice but to let it happen. He wouldn't protest even if he could. Isaac finally lets the fatigue take hold of him. He closes his eyes.

—

The next morning, Sheriff Stilinski comes to speak with him. Isaac instantly feels a little flurry of panic rise in his chest. He and the sheriff don't necessarily have the best track record. Despite all the proof that it was Matt who killed Isaac's father, Isaac still gets the feeling that Stilinski doesn't quite trust him.

"Mr. Lahey," the sheriff greets. "Are you *sure* you don't remember anything from before the accident yesterday?"

And there it is. The sheriff doesn't believe him. It's not really a surprise. Nobody trusts Isaac these days. It's frustrating. Mostly because Isaac has no idea how to regain trust he never had to begin with.

The sheriff must see something on Isaac's face because he continues,

“Even if you only remember something small, it could help us piece together what happened.”

“Sheriff, I *swear* I don’t remember anything. All I remember is waking up on the pavement and seeing the girl next to me. Then I called 911.” It’s not necessarily a lie. Isaac certainly can’t tell him about the werewolf twins. None of that would be helpful to Stilinski anyway.

The sheriff sighs, “All right. If you remember anything...”

“I’ll tell you,” Isaac says. The sheriff leaves, and Isaac exhales a breath of relief. He really does wish he had his memories back. Partly because he wants to help, but also because it’s disorienting. It’s scary to know that there’s a black spot in his memories. He doesn’t like the feeling. It’s disconcerting to say the least.

Not long after the sheriff leaves, Melissa comes to check on him. She has one of the warmest smiles Isaac has ever seen, and it momentarily breaks his heart. From the doorway, Melissa asks, “How are you doing, Isaac? I came in earlier, but you were completely passed out.”

“How’s the girl?” Isaac asks, ignoring Melissa’s question. Isaac knows he’s going to be fine, but the girl was only human. Isaac needs to know if she’s okay, it’s been tearing at the back of his mind all day. He needs to know.

Melissa’s warm smile turns a little pitying. “She’s stable, so she’ll be okay. But, more importantly, Isaac, *how are you?*”

Isaac gives a small shrug, “I can feel the scratch healing already.”

“Let me take a look,” Melissa says, coming around the side of the bed and putting on a pair of gloves. Isaac rearranges his hospital gown so that she can have easy access to the wound. Melissa slowly peels the dressing back and Isaac hisses at the uncomfortable sensation.

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s healing, visibly. Wow. They – They can’t see this. Nobody can see this,” Melissa says, sounding equal parts awed and worried.

Isaac glances at the still slightly ajar door. “All right, cover it, cover it up.”

Melissa does, but she shakes her head in disbelief, saying, “I don’t think that’s gonna matter. I mean, you’re scheduled for surgery, which is obviously going to be very confusing for a lot of people.”

“Okay, can you do something?” Isaac asks, looking up at Melissa. He has no idea what he’s supposed to do in this situation, and he trusts her. Sure, he doesn’t know her very well, but she raised Scott, so she must have good instincts.

“Me do something?” Melissa asks, looking confused. “I’m relatively new to all of this, and there’s a sheriff’s deputy that’s stationed right outside the door.”

“Have you tried calling Derek?” Isaac asks.

“Like, five times,” she says. Isaac tries to push down the hurt that causes. “Do you have any other emergency werewolf contacts?”

“Yeah,” Isaac says, despite the fact that Melissa sounds like she might be joking. “Call Scott.”

Melissa looks taken aback at first, but, eventually, she nods. Then she leaves too.

Alone in his hospital room, Isaac tries to ignore the ache in his chest. *Where the hell is Derek?* Now that Isaac is less exhausted, the context for his missing memories has started to come back to him. Now, Isaac remembers he was looking for Boyd and Erica who were kidnapped by the alpha pack. Isaac, Derek, and Peter have been trying to track down the pair ever since things with Gerard and the kanima calmed down. Derek knew Isaac had gone looking for them. *So where is he?*

—

As the scratch in Isaac’s side continues to heal, his energy replenishes. With each passing moment, the gravity of the situation starts to dawn on him. Isaac is almost fully healed, and when he is, he’ll have numerous medical professionals to answer to. Not to mention the deputy posted outside his door. Isaac is trapped inside this hospital room waiting for certain doom, and there’s nothing he can do about it. All he can do is hope that Scott comes through for him. Luckily, Scott has never failed Isaac before.

Just then, the door to Isaac’s room opens, and an unfamiliar nurse walks in. “Hello, Isaac.”

Isaac immediately moves to sit up, “Hi.”

“How are we feeling?” the nurse asks.

“Good, listen,” Isaac touches the IV on his hand, seriously considering just ripping it out. “I think I could probably just—”

The nurse places a firm hand on Isaac’s shoulder, cutting him off and stopping him in his tracks. Isaac looks up at the nurse. Before he has the chance to protest, she slides a needle into the injection port of his IV. The nurse pushes the syringe plunger, administering the unknown medicine.

“What is that?” Isaac asks, concerned.

“Just an anesthetic.” Isaac watches as the nurse pushes the last few drops into his IV line, sealing his fate. Any hopes of Isaac getting out of the hospital unnoticed vanish in the blink of an eye.

“We don’t want you getting in the way again,” the nurse says, drawing Isaac’s attention towards her. The look on her face can only be described as sinister. Isaac quickly starts to realize that something is wrong, but drowsiness is already creeping up his spine. As the anesthetic kicks in, Isaac’s head rolls to the side, putting the ground in his line of sight. It’s then that Isaac notices the nurse’s bare feet and her clawed toenails. Isaac fights against the sedation, slowly and with great effort, turning his head to look back up at the werewolf.

“Count along with me, Isaac,” the not-nurse says. Fear plays at the edges of Isaac’s awareness, but it’s dulled by the sedation working its way through his bloodstream.

“One,” the first clawed finger. “Two,” the second clawed finger. “Three.”

Glowing red eyes are the last thing Isaac sees before the anesthetic takes over.

—

Isaac comes to on an uncomfortable table. It takes him a long moment to reorient himself. Isaac knows that it must have been hours since the alpha attacked him at the hospital, but to him it feels like seconds. Slowly, he sits up, taking in his surroundings. It’s easy for Isaac to recognize the old Hale house, especially when he hears Derek’s voice filtering in from the next room over.

Isaac slowly turns his body in the direction of the noise. The anesthesia is still lingering in his system causing his movements to be sluggish and clumsy. Isaac sees Derek, then Stiles, and, lastly, Scott. A

feeling of safety swells in Isaac at the sight of Scott, one he can't say he feels around Derek.

As Isaac regains his bearings, he realizes with a start that the girl who saved him is nowhere to be found.

"Where is she?" Isaac asks. Three heads turn to face him at once. "Where's the girl?"

There's a long pause, and then Derek asks, "What girl?"

The question instantly fills Isaac with dismay. It starts in his stomach like a lead weight, then spreads to the rest of his body. Isaac swallows. "The girl who rescued me? She was at the hospital?"

Isaac looks between their three blank expressions. Isaac's stomach tightens. She saved his life, and they have no idea who he's talking about. Isaac runs his fingers through his hair, "The alphas were after her too. We have to... She- We-"

"Okay, Isaac. We'll find her," Scott interrupts before the panic can fully take over. "I'll call my mom. She might still be at the hospital."

Isaac nods. If the alphas got to her, it's his fault. Isaac doesn't know how they ended up together that night, but he does know that if she had left him behind, she would have made it out. She would have had no problem outrunning the alpha twins without his dead weight. Guilt floods every corner of Isaac's mind.

Derek approaches him. "What happened?"

"I don't know. The alphas took my memories," Isaac says. He reaches up to touch the back of his neck, but the puncture marks have already healed over.

"So that means you must have found them?" Derek questions. Unsurprisingly, Derek's bedside manner leaves something to be desired. When Derek asks questions they always come out like an interrogation.

"I - I don't know. We just - We have to find the girl, okay? She knows where they are," Isaac says. He doesn't actually know that for certain, but if finding the girl can help them find the alphas, then Derek will be much more inclined to do so. Besides, even if she doesn't know exactly where the alphas are, she's bound to know more about them than they do. She might be able to help. Although, she's already

helped Isaac plenty. And it might have gotten her killed.

Scott enters the room, “The girl isn’t there. My mom said she was highly sedated before the fight broke out and... and the deputy in her room was killed. I’m sorry, Isaac.”

Isaac shakes his head frantically. “We have to look for her.”

“Isaac,” Derek says, somehow sounding both pitying and scolding, as if Isaac is behaving like a child. “If the alphas were after her, then she’s dead.”

“Derek!” Scott exclaims, looking scandalized.

“Well, I would’ve put it a bit more gently,” Stiles says, glaring at Derek. “But... he’s right.”

Isaac can’t believe what he’s hearing. She saved his life. She saved his life, and now she’s dead. She’s dead, and it’s his fault. Isaac wants to tear his hair out. He wants to scream or cry.

Instead, he just nods. “Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: season 3A isn’t that great because I hadn’t written for five years when I started this fic, but if you stick with it I promise it’ll get better

Tattoo

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 2

Word count: 4,151

Isaac slept for almost a full day after that. As soon as they got back to the loft, Isaac ducked out of whatever question's Derek might have had for him, and crashed down onto the couch. Sleep came almost instantly. His body had been deprived of true rest for so long there was nothing he could do to fight against it. Not that Isaac would have wanted to. Sleep was the perfect escape.

Now, Isaac is awake, and has been thrown back into the chaos.

"You know, I'm starting not to like this idea. It sounds kind of dangerous." Isaac says, pacing in front of the big loft window. Derek's plan had sounded reasonable to Isaac's sleep-addled brain, but, now that Isaac is fully awake, he isn't so sure. "You know what, I definitely don't like this idea and I definitely don't like him."

"You'll be fine," Derek says without a hint of patience.

Isaac stops his pacing to turn to Derek, "Does it have to be *him*?"

"He knows how to do it. I don't. It'd be more dangerous if I tried doing it myself," Derek says. This entire time Derek hasn't looked up from the book he's studying. It's almost like he's trying to demonstrate to Isaac how little importance his concerns hold. It's only mildly frustrating.

"You know Scott doesn't trust him, right?" Isaac asks. He fiddles with the cover of one of the old books laid out on the table, admitting, "Personally, I'd – well, I'd trust Scott."

"Do you trust me?" Derek asks, finally looking at him.

Isaac hesitates for what is probably half a second too long. "Yeah."

Derek doesn't say anything. He just nods and returns his attention to his book.

"I still don't like him," Isaac complains.

“Nobody likes him,” Derek deadpans.

Right then, the door to the loft slides open with a metallic creak, revealing Peter Hale in all his infuriating glory.

“Boys,” he greets. Then, “FYI, yes, coming back from the dead has left my abilities somewhat impaired, but the hearing still works. So I hope you’re comfortable saying whatever it is that you’re feeling straight to my face.”

“We don’t like you,” Derek says, slamming his book closed. “Now, shut up and help us.”

Isaac has to fight back a smile at that. *Derek does have his moments.*

“Fair enough,” Peter says, flashing his claws.

Derek directs Isaac to sit in an uncomfortable metal chair in the middle of the room. Isaac tries not to outwardly show his nerves, but this whole thing makes him incredibly uneasy. He doesn’t like the idea of Peter Hale rummaging around in his head. Isaac wasn’t lying when he said he trusts Derek, but he also wasn’t lying when he said he doesn’t trust Peter. There’s nothing trustworthy about a man who came back from the dead.

“Relax, I’ll get more out of you if you’re calm,” Peter says.

“How do you know how to do this again?” Isaac asks, hoping that having more information will help settle his nerves.

“It’s an ancient ritual used mostly by alphas since it’s a skill that requires quite a bit of practice,” Peter explains, tracing his clawed fingers over the back of Isaac’s neck. “One slip, and you could paralyze someone. Or kill them.”

“You – You’ve had a lot of practice though, right?” Isaac questions, glancing first at Derek and then back to Peter.

“Well, I’ve never paralyzed anyone.” Peter says.

For a moment, Isaac feels reassured. Then the true meaning of the statement sinks in. “Wait, does that mean that you’ve–”

Peter cuts Isaac off by stabbing his claws into his neck. Isaac grunts in pain, fighting against the intrusion. It’s one of the most uncomfortable things Isaac has ever experienced. It feels like someone is tugging at

his brain, like he's being touched somewhere no human was ever meant to be touched. With each second that passes, the sensation gets more and more intense. Isaac flails.

Isaac doesn't see the memories that Peter does. Isaac can barely see anything at all. His awareness of the real world has started to fade. His vision is so blurry all he can make out are vague shapes and colors. It feels wrongly intimate. It feels like an invasion.

The whole thing can't last more than a couple of minutes, but to Isaac it feels like hours. Then, just as suddenly as the sensation started, it stops. Peter tears his claws from his neck, and just like that, it's over. Isaac slumps forward, going limp.

Distantly, Isaac registers Derek asking, "What'd you see?"

Isaac rubs at the back of his neck, trying to sooth the stinging punctures. There are unshed tears in his eyes. Isaac is perfectly content to let Derek and Peter deal with this. He feels numb.

"Uh," Peter says, panting. "It was confusing. Um, im-images. Vague shapes."

"But you saw something." Derek says. It's not a question.

"Isaac found them," Peter says.

Isaac clenches his jaw and finally looks up. The vindictive part of his brain is pleased to see how shaken Peter appears.

"Erica and Boyd?" Derek asks.

"I barely saw them. I mean, glimpses. You—" Peter stammers. Isaac has never seen him without his usual confident demeanor. It's unsettling.

"But you did see them," Derek says. It's still not a question.

"Worse," Peter says, rubbing over his fingers like they might be hurting. *Good*, Isaac thinks.

"Deucalion," Derek guesses. With Peter's small nod of confirmation, Derek slowly sits down, burying his face in his hands. Isaac feels similarly deflated. His tears finally spill over his cheeks as an unexplainable feeling of dread takes over.

"He was talking to them. Something about... time running out."

“What does it mean?” Isaac asks, turning to face Derek. Derek meets Isaac’s gaze. Isaac internally begs him not to say what they’re all thinking.

“He’s going to kill them,” Derek says, looking to Peter for confirmation.

“No, no, no, no, no. He didn’t *say* that. He – He did make them a promise that *by* the full moon they’d both be dead,” Peter says. Isaac doesn’t see how that’s any different than Deucalion saying he would kill them. Even if he doesn’t kill them himself, it’s still his fault. It’s second degree killing. The result is still the same.

“The *next* full moon?” Derek asks.

Peter finally looks over at them. “Tomorrow night.”

Isaac feels a fresh wave of tears welling up in his eyes, but he refuses to let them spill. They’ll just have to find them. Isaac already did it once before, so it can’t be that hard. They *will* find them.

“Fill me in when you come up with one of your ridiculous plans, will you?” Peter excuses himself, never one to hang around when things get too risky.

Derek comes behind Isaac and grabs his wrist, moving his hand away from the back of his neck. Isaac lets him. Derek traces one of the marks with his thumb, “They don’t look too bad. You’ll heal in a few hours.”

Isaac nods. With just the two of them left in the loft, Isaac lets his tears fall once more. There’s no use hiding this from Derek. “Do you think... Can we–”

“We’ll find them,” Derek says, with no room for argument. It’s exactly what Isaac needs.

Derek’s phone pings. “It’s Scott,” he says. “They may have found something that can help us. I’m going to meet him at the school. You stay here. Sleep it off.”

Grateful for the permission, Isaac slinks back to the couch.

—

When Derek returns, Isaac is eating a sandwich on the couch.

"I hate when you do that. We have a perfectly good table," Derek says.

With a shrug and a half aborted smirk, Isaac shoves the last two bites into his mouth all at once. Derek rolls his eyes.

When Isaac finally finishes chewing, he asks, "What did they find?"

Derek's expression turns sour, "Nothing useful."

Isaac raises an eyebrow, but doesn't question it.

"We're going to meet Scott at the animal clinic. Deaton has an idea to retrieve your memories," Derek says.

"Oh. Okay," Isaac agrees easily, if a little hesitant. Isaac is glad to have direction, but after this morning's attempt, feeling cautious is only natural.

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At the animal clinic, Isaac's hesitancy turns out to be well founded.

"Obviously, it's not going to be particularly..." Deaton pauses to glance over at Derek, Scott, and Stiles who are filling the bath with ice, "Comfortable. But if we can slow your heart rate down enough, you'll slip into a trance-like state."

"Like being hypnotized," Isaac says, trying to wrap his head around the plan.

"Exactly. You'll be half transformed. It'll let us access your subconscious mind," Deaton explains.

Isaac kneels down by the side of the ice bath. He wishes they had a plan that didn't involve meddling with his brain. Although, Isaac muses, how else are they going to retrieve stolen memories?

"How slow does his heart rate need to be?" Scott asks.

"Very slow," Deaton says, as ambiguous as ever.

"Okay, well, how slow is very slow?" Derek asks, sounding impatient. It's a little bit hypocritical considering Derek is the most annoyingly vague person Isaac has ever met.

"Nearly dead," Deaton says far too casually. The response doesn't generate as much fear in Isaac as it probably should.

Isaac dips his hand into the water, flinching at the startling cold. "It's safe though, right?"

"Do you want me to answer honestly?" Deaton asks. The question is genuine, despite the fact that he already knows the answer.

"No." Isaac says. "No, not really."

The sound of rubber snapping echoes throughout the room, interrupting the intense atmosphere. They all look over at Stiles to see him with a long rubber glove pulled over his arm. Various shades of annoyance paint the faces of the other four.

"What?" Stiles asks, oblivious. Stiles looks between the four of them as they watch him expectantly. Stiles petulantly rips the glove off and tosses it to the side. Isaac resists the urge to roll his eyes.

Isaac stands up, releasing a breath of air.

"Look, if it feels too risky, you *don't* have to do this," Derek says. His voice is so sincere, Isaac is surprised by it. Isaac knows that Derek cares about his well-being to a certain extent, he's just not quite sure how far that goes yet.

Isaac glances over at Scott who nods in agreement.

Somehow, this idea scares Isaac less than the claws in his neck did. Isaac trusts everyone in this room to keep him alive. He's willing to shoulder this responsibility if it means finding Boyd and Erica. He strips his shirt off and climbs in the bath.

Immediately, the cold overtakes him. It soaks through his jeans and chills him to the core. There is no relief. He just has to ride this out.

Scott and Derek waste no time in grabbing his shoulders and pushing him under.

When Isaac is fully submerged, all logical thought flies out the window. All he can focus on is escaping the cold. It's all consuming. Isaac battles his way to the surface, eyes glowing gold and fangs bared. He grips the side of the bath trying to use it as leverage, but Scott and Derek are too strong. They push him under again.

Isaac doesn't know how many times the cycle repeats itself, but eventually the fight leaves his body. He floats up to the surface and then keeps going. The feeling of cold is still there, but it's far away

now. There's no sense of urgency. He just floats. The contents of his brain come untethered, swirling like the water.

"Isaac? Can you hear me?" a voice comes through like a small wave breaking on the shore.

"Yes." Isaac answers on reflex. "I can hear you."

"This is Dr. Deaton. I'd like to ask you a few questions. Is that all right?" The words are soft and rhythmic. Isaac lets them wash over him, unhurried and predictable.

"Yes." Isaac says again. The answers come so easily this way.

"I want to ask you about the night you found Erica and Boyd. I want you to remember it for me in as vivid detail as possible, like you're actually there again."

As Deaton speaks, the waves get stronger. It's not so peaceful anymore. An unpleasant feeling starts to lap at Isaac's skin. He squirms, "I – I don't wanna do that. I don't – I don't wanna do that. I don't wanna do that."

"Just relax. They're just memories. You can't be hurt by a memory." The words are still coming, but all Isaac can focus on is struggling against the discomfort weighing him down.

"I don't wanna do that," Isaac repeats, trying to stay afloat.

"Relax." Deaton's voice comes firmer. "Relax." The repetition is soothing. "Relax." Isaac does.

"Now let's go back to that night. To the place you found Erica and Boyd. Can you tell me what you see? Is there some kind of building? A house?"

Memories start to drift up to meet Isaac at the surface. He doesn't have to strain for them, they just come to him. He just knows. "It's not – It's not a house. It's stone. I think marble."

"That's perfect. Can you give me any other descriptors?"

The question is a wave, and, when it breaks, the answer is already there. Isaac floats, rocking gently with the tide. "It's dusty, so... empty."

"Like an abandoned building?" The words are like a trigger. Suddenly

the memory isn't floating up to meet him, but pulling Isaac down into it. "Isaac?"

"Someone's here." Isaac can't stay afloat. He's getting swept under. He's in it now. The water is gone. He's no longer floating, but standing on solid ground. He's in the abandoned building, and he's not alone. "Someone's here."

"Isaac, relax."

Isaac hears Deaton, but it's too late. He's been caught. "No, no, no. They see me. They see me!"

Isaac screams. He reaches up on instinct. He grabs someone's arm, and it grounds him. Deaton's voice filters through the chaos, reminding him that this is all just a memory. The water flows over his chest and the images fade to black and white. He's still in it, but he's safe. The anchor slips out of his grip and he floats back up to the surface.

"Good," the reassurance washes over him. "Now tell us what you see. Tell us everything."

The directions are good. He doesn't make the conscious decision to follow them, he just does. On instinct, Isaac starts to look around. He's in a stairwell, and he can hear a man's voice coming from somewhere within the memory. Isaac focuses on it. It's Boyd. *"But I can't control it."*

Isaac's eyes open, but he's still in the memory. "I hear him. He's talking about the full moon, about being out of control when the moon rises."

"Is he talking to Erica?"

"I think so I can't – I can't see her, I can't see either of them." Boyd's voice is distinct, unmistakable. He sounds like he's talking to someone, but Isaac hasn't heard a second voice yet.

"Can you hear anything else?"

Isaac tunes his hearing, listening closely. "He's worried. He's worried what he'll do during the moon. He's worried that he's going to hurt someone."

"Isaac, we need to find them right now. Can you see them?"

“No.”

The voice is still speaking, but its words are fading out of focus. Isaac can hear something in his memory. Footsteps. Isaac sits up with a gasp. “They’re here.”

“It’s all right—”

“No. They’re here,” Isaac sinks back into the water, panic overtaking him once more. “They see me! They found me! They’re here!”

“Isaac, where are you?” A new voice breaks through the memory. It’s not a small wave, but a tsunami. The force of it pushes Isaac back. He stumbles, losing his footing.

The memory starts to fade right out from under him, turning black at the edges. “I can’t see!”

The voices come in shouts now. Wave after brutal wave. He doesn’t have a chance to steady himself, they just keep coming. He’s getting torn between the memory and reality.

“Isaac, where are you? What did you see?”

The question comes through louder than the rest. Isaac blinks unseeing. The answer is right there, he’s so close. He focuses and the memory starts to build up around him again. He sees the vault door.

“It’s a vault! It’s a bank vault!”

In the memory, one of the alphas pulls him back from the vault door. She pushes him to the ground, pinning him with her foot. And then...

Then Isaac is back in reality. The memory is fading and awareness comes back to him. He sits up in a rush, “I saw it! I saw the name.”

Now that he’s fully lucid, the cold slams into Isaac. He’s got a one track mind, desperate to get warm and share the information he discovered. With the help of Scott and Derek, Isaac quickly clambers out of the ice bath. Deaton wraps a soft, fluffy towel around Isaac’s shoulders. Isaac clings to it.

“It’s uh – It’s Beacon Hills First National Bank. It’s um... It’s an abandoned bank, and they’re keeping them locked inside, inside the vault,” Isaac says in a rush despite the shivers racking through his body.

When Isaac's revelation is met only with silence, he takes the time to actually look at each of them. Their expressions are dull and solemn. Isaac is missing something. "What?"

"You don't remember what you said right before you came out of it, do you?" Stiles asks.

Isaac pauses. It all got so convoluted at the end. He shakes his head, wet hair dripping, and says, "No."

"Uh, you said when they captured you that they dragged you into a room... and that there was a body in it," Stiles says.

Isaac doesn't remember any of this. He was just trying so hard to hold onto the memory of the location. He glances at Deaton and then back at Stiles, "What body?"

"Erica," Stiles pauses. "You said it was Erica."

Isaac looks over at Scott. He gives him a small nod of affirmation. Isaac shakes his head in disbelief, running his fingers through his wet hair.

Deaton, seeming to notice the distress radiating off of him, says, "Come on. Let's get you warm, and then we can talk about it."

Everyone goes quiet for the next few minutes as shock starts to settle over them. Isaac uses the towel to dry his upper body. His jeans are soaked beyond saving, but his shirt is dry and warm, so he tugs it on. He climbs up onto the table against the wall. He makes himself as small as he can, wrapping his arms around his knees.

Scott turns to him, "Are you okay?"

"Still cold," Isaac says. Isaac knows Scott is really asking about his emotional state, but Isaac doesn't want to touch that right now. When this is all over, when the full moon passes with or without saving Boyd and Erica, then Isaac can deal with it. For the next twenty-four hours, Isaac is keeping his emotions locked in a vault of their own.

Stiles walks over to the table, "Bet you wish you had some rubber gloves now."

A wet laugh forces itself out of Isaac without his consent. Stiles gives him a look that Isaac thinks is supposed to be comforting. It works. He relaxes a little bit, holding his knees a little less tightly and breathing

a little more deeply.

Scott, noticing that Isaac has significantly calmed, starts the conversation. “If Erica really is dead—”

Derek cuts Scott off, yelling, “She’s not dead!”

“Derek, he said, ‘There’s a dead body. It’s Erica.’ That doesn’t exactly leave us much room for interpretation,” Stiles says. It sounds harsh on Isaac’s ears, but he knows Stiles is just being pragmatic.

“Then who was in the vault with Boyd?” Derek asks.

“Someone else, obviously,” Stiles says.

“Maybe it was the girl on the motorcycle,” Scott says. He looks over at Isaac, “The one that saved you?”

Isaac hums, contemplating. He looks up at Derek, then says, “I didn’t actually hear a second voice.”

Isaac had been operating under the assumption that Boyd was talking to someone, but now that he knows Boyd is locked in a bank vault, talking to himself becomes a much more reasonable possibility.

“Maybe, that’s how Erica died. Like they pit them against each other during the full moons and see which one survives. It’s like werewolf *Thunderdome*,” Stiles says, proposing a likely theory.

“Then what’s going to happen now that Boyd’s in there alone?” Scott asks.

They all pause.

“He’s not worried he’s going to hurt *someone*, he’s worried he’s gonna hurt *himself*,” Stiles says.

“Then we get him out of there tonight,” Derek says. There’s a newfound determination in his eyes that Isaac hasn’t seen since they were trying to figure out the kanima’s identity.

“Be smart about this, Derek,” Deaton says, speaking up for the first time in a long moment. “You can’t just go storming in.”

“If Isaac got in, then so can we,” Derek says. Isaac tries not to take offense to that. More than anything, he just hopes Derek’s right.

“But he didn’t get through a vault door, did he?” Deaton adds.

Isaac watches as Stiles pulls his phone from his pocket. He’s typing rapidly. Isaac hopes there isn’t a second emergency. He can’t handle two simultaneous disasters. Stiles must feel Isaac’s gaze because he turns to look at him. He smirks and raises his eyebrows as if to say, *watch this*.

“We need a plan,” Scott says, trying to steer the conversation in a productive direction.

“How are we going to come up with a plan to break into a bank vault in less than twenty-four hours?” Derek questions, voice practically dripping with skepticism.

“Uh, I think someone already did,” Stiles says, then reads off his phone, “‘Beacon Hills First National closes its doors three months after vault robbery.’ Doesn’t say here how it was robbed, but it probably won’t take long to find out.”

“How long?” Derek demands.

“It’s the Internet, Derek, okay?” Stiles says with a huff of a laugh. Isaac glances back and forth between the two of them, the hint of a smile playing at his lips. Derek raises his eyebrows expectantly. Stiles smirks, “Minutes.”

Isaac can only see part of Stiles’ expression, but he’s honestly surprised Derek hasn’t decked him yet.

“Okay. Stiles and I will go to his house and research the previous break-in. You,” Scott says looking at Derek, “take Isaac home. He’s still shivering.”

Isaac has never seen Derek take orders from anybody. Derek’s expression turns unreadable, but, surprisingly, he doesn’t argue. He says, “Let us know as soon as you find something.”

Scott agrees easily. He turns his full attention onto Isaac and it’s more than a little bit overwhelming. Scott looks at him with so much care. Isaac has never been looked at like that. For a moment, it seems like Scott wants to ask Isaac if he’s okay again. Instead, he just nods. Isaac thinks there must be a hidden meaning there, but he doesn’t know what it is.

After that, Scott and Stiles head on their way. Deaton turns to Derek,

“Isaac is going to need a good deal of rest. It’s probably best if he isn’t involved in the rescue mission.”

Derek agrees. Isaac has to hold back a sigh of relief. The thought of going back to the bank makes him feel sick to his stomach. He struggles up off the table, and Derek reaches out to steady him.

“You’re freezing,” Derek says, sounding a little shocked by it.

Isaac doesn’t know what to say to that, so he stays quiet. Derek thanks Deaton, and then leads them out of the clinic.

—

When they get back to the loft, Isaac stops them in the doorway. He doesn’t know if he wants the answer or not, but he has to ask, “Do you really think she could still be alive?”

“I don’t know,” Derek says, honest and a little apologetic.

“I – I’m sorry,” Isaac says.

That makes Derek take pause. He steps closer to Isaac, placing a hand on his shoulder and looking him in the eye. It almost feels like Derek is truly looking at him for the first time. “Don’t be. If Erica is dead, it’s my fault.”

Isaac wants to protest, but, before he can, Derek is barreling on. “Go take a warm shower. I’ll make you dinner just this once.”

A smile twitches at the corner of Isaac’s lips. “Thank you.”

“You did good today,” Derek says, then releases his shoulder and turns away. Isaac has to fight back tears.

Fireflies

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 3

Word count: 4,678

Much later into the night, Isaac wakes to his phone ringing. The first thing Isaac notices is that the moon has risen. By now, Boyd is either dead or has been rescued. The second thing Isaac notices is that the call is from Derek, so he answers instantly.

“Derek?” Isaac’s voice sounds scratchy from sleep.

“We could use your help,” Derek says, right to the point. Then, a little softer, *“If you feel up to it.”*

“What happened?” Isaac asks, confused and disoriented from his nap.

“Boyd escaped and we have to catch him before he kills someone,” Derek says simply.

Isaac feels relief tugging at his heart. Boyd is alive. “Okay. Where are you?”

“The trails by the entrance to the preserve,” Derek says.

“I’ll be there soon,” Isaac says, already climbing off the couch. Before Derek can hang up on him, Isaac quickly adds, “What about Erica?”

There’s a pause. *“She’s dead.”*

“Oh.” Isaac doesn’t know what he’s supposed to say. He and Derek make a great pair. Two broken shells of humans who have lost so many people in their lives that it has grown to feel inevitable. More than anything else, Isaac just feels numb. And that makes him feel guilty.

Derek doesn’t say anything for a long moment. Isaac almost thinks he hung up, but then Derek clears his throat. *“Are you still coming?”*

“Yeah,” Isaac says easily. Because it is easy. It’s so much easier to throw himself into the next adventure than it is to process his emotions. So, Isaac, still quite cold, grabs a scarf and heads on his

way.

Isaac is making his way through the trails to meet up with Derek when he hears the sound of a low growl followed by a girl screaming. Isaac quickly turns in the direction the noise came from. Isaac jumps into a clearing to find Boyd standing over a terrified teenage girl. Boyd turns his attention towards Isaac and growls. Isaac sneers.

Then, they both lunge. Boyd comes at Isaac, but Isaac is much faster. He easily dodges each swipe of Boyd's claws, managing to land a harsh scratch along Boyd's stomach. Boyd stumbles, losing his footing, and Isaac tries not to enjoy it too much. In the days Isaac and Boyd spent training together, Isaac rarely managed to get a good hit on Boyd. It's a testament to the effect the full moon has on Boyd's cognitive abilities.

Isaac has the upper hand in speed and awareness, but Boyd has always been stronger than him. Isaac shouldn't be as surprised as he is when Boyd bodily throws Isaac up into the branches of a tree. Isaac hits the ground hard. He winces, but is quick to try and get back up.

Isaac is kneeling, preparing to strike again, when a body flies over his head. Scott crashes feet first into Boyd's stomach, sending both of them to the ground. Scott swiftly recovers, flipping back up onto his feet. It takes Boyd a moment longer to get up – *the bigger they are, the bigger they are* – and it's all the advantage they need. Isaac and Derek join the ranks behind Scott, and the three of them stand off against Boyd. Cornered, Boyd takes off running deeper into the woods. Isaac and Derek hastily follow after him.

Unfortunately, Boyd loses them in the maze of trees. Scott joins them and the three of them keep running in the general direction he disappeared in, but they aren't having any luck. When Scott's phone rings, they all stop to regroup.

"Lydia found a body at the pool. It was definitely Boyd," Isaac hears Stiles' voice over the tinny phone speaker. If it weren't for their werewolf hearing, Derek and Isaac wouldn't be able to hear him at all.

"Are you sure?" Scott asks.

"Yep. Throat ripped out, blood everywhere. It's like The freaking Shining over here. If two little twin girls come out of the woods, start asking me to play with them forever and ever, I'm not gonna be surprised," Stiles

rambles.

“Can you get a little closer to make sure it was him?” Scott asks, noticing the gaping hole in the story. Boyd shouldn’t have had time to get all the way to the public pool.

Stiles’ voice comes through the speakers sounding incredulous, “*“Make sure it was him?” Scott, who else is going around ripping throats out?”*

“Please just do it,” Scott implores. If it was anyone else asking, Isaac knows Stiles wouldn’t comply, but the following silence seems to indicate that he does.

A moment later, Stiles’ voice reappears, sounding somewhat shaken, “*Scott, it had to have been Boyd.*”

“Okay, just... wait with Lydia for the police,” Scott says.

“*On it,*” Stiles says, then hangs up.

Scott turns back to face Isaac and Derek, his concern almost palpable.

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Derek says instantly. “The public pool is all the way on the other side of the woods. We haven’t tracked him anywhere near there.”

“Derek, he killed someone,” Scott says.

“How is he moving so fast?” Derek asks.

“Derek.” Scott interjects, voice gone stern.

“We were just with him. He can’t be that fast on foot!” Derek says. Isaac, content to let Derek and Scott work this one out, refuses to admit it, but Derek does have a point.

“Boyd *killed* someone,” Scott says again. “Some totally innocent kid is dead... and it’s our fault.”

There’s a pause, before Derek says, quieter than before, “It’s my fault.”

Isaac wants to tell them that they’re both wrong, but he can’t find the words for it. It can’t possibly be Scott or Derek’s fault. They didn’t lock Boyd in that bank vault. If it weren’t for them, Boyd would be dead right now.

“We need help,” Scott says. Isaac doubts Derek has ever asked for help

in his entire life.

“We have Isaac now,” Derek says, gesturing towards him.

“I mean *real* help,” Scott says, like Derek is being purposefully obtuse, which *ouch*. Isaac glances over at Scott, face falling into an offended frown.

“He’s too fast. For all of us,” Scott says by means of explanation, which is definitely not good enough for Isaac’s bruised ego. “He’s too strong, too rabid.”

“We’ll catch him,” Derek says.

“What happens if we do? We just gonna hold him down until the sun comes up?” Isaac asks, voice laced with disbelief and almost amusement.

Derek pauses, then says, “Maybe it would be... easier just to kill him.”

Isaac wishes he was even a little bit surprised by Derek’s words, but he’s not. He does wonder if Derek would have the same cutthroat attitude if it was Isaac instead of Boyd. Isaac knows the relationship between an alpha and their first beta is always different from the rest, but he isn’t sure what that means for him and Derek, especially when, technically speaking, it’s *Jackson* who’s Derek’s first beta.

Maybe Isaac should feel some hesitancy about killing Boyd, but, like the rest of the people Isaac cares about, his death feels inevitable. If Erica is dead, it won’t be long before Boyd is too. Isaac is probably included in the list of fast approaching deaths, but it’s better not to think about that at all.

“Killing him isn’t the right thing to do,” Scott says, which is so typical of him. Scott’s instinct is always to do the right thing. It’s admirable if not a little inconvenient.

“What if it’s the only thing to do?” Isaac asks. “If we can’t even catch them, what else do we do?”

“Find someone who knows what they’re doing,” Scott says.

“Who?” Derek asks, like he already knows.

“Someone who knows how to hunt werewolves.”

Isaac and Derek wait in the car while Scott approaches Argent in the grocery store parking lot. Isaac isn't all that surprised when Argent pulls the gun on Scott. *Like father, like daughter*, Isaac muses. Allison's weapon of choice might not be a gun, but she's definitely trigger happy.

"Do you think this is gonna work?" Isaac asks.

"Nope," Derek says without giving it a second thought.

"Me neither," Isaac agrees. He clicks his tongue, and, thinking about something he's wanted to ask Derek about for a while, says, "So, uh. What's the deal with you and Stiles?"

Derek fixes Isaac with the most deadpan, unamused expression he has ever seen. If looks could kill, Isaac would be worse off than Erica.

"Sorry, yeah, it's—" Isaac clears his throat, scrambling to amend things. "It's bad timing. I'm sorry." Derek looks away, and that would have been the end of it, but then Isaac tacks on, "I'll ask later. It's fine."

Derek slowly turns to face Isaac again. He's wearing the same expression, but this time his eyes are fiercer, colder, angrier.

"Or never," Isaac says hurriedly, "Yeah, yeah. I'm good with never."

The car goes quiet. There's an awkward tension in the air now. Isaac readjusts in his seat, trying to ignore it by focusing on Scott. Isaac watches as Argent lowers his gun. He feels a sense of relief run through him at the sight. He didn't really think Argent would kill Scott, but he wouldn't put clipping him past the man.

Argent steps closer to Scott as the conversation between them continues. If Isaac *really* trained his hearing, he could probably listen in, but he doesn't. He just watches.

Argent starts to back away, and it seems like their plan is going to fail, but then Scott stops him. Whatever Scott says next must have the desired effect because, next thing they know, Scott is climbing into Argent's car. Derek puts their own car in drive and starts to follow them.

Halfway to their destination, Isaac realizes they aren't going in the direction of the preserve. Derek must notice too because he says, "This is the way to the pool."

“Huh,” Isaac intones, confused.

Derek pulls over a block away from the location. Isaac figures the pair of them don’t need an extra reason to be suspected by the police. After that, only a few minutes pass before Scott is texting them to meet back at the trails.

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The two cars pull up at the preserve at almost exactly the same time. Isaac steps out of the car and watches as Derek and Argent exchange weary glances. Just another person Derek has history with.

Scott leads the way toward the last place they saw Boyd. He crouches down by a pair of footprints. Argent drops his duffel bag and mimics Scott’s position. “You’re tracking them by print?”

Isaac leans against a nearby tree, watching the exchange with muted curiosity.

“Trying to,” Scott says.

“Well, then, you’ve been wasting your time,” Argent says.

Isaac tilts his head. He hasn’t quite decided how he feels about Argent yet. His entire demeanor makes it increasingly obvious that he’s only here because of Scott’s persuasion, not out of the kindness of his heart. That’s the effect Scott has on people. He makes you care, even when you never have before.

“There’s only one creature on earth that can visually track footprints, and that’s man,” Argent says, standing up. “And if you’re not trained like me, you have no idea that this this print is mine and these—”

“Are Boyd’s,” Isaac interjects.

“Nope. They’re yours,” Argent says, stamping down on Isaac’s confidence. Isaac stands up from his spot against the tree, looking down at the prints. “You trampled Boyd’s as soon as you walked over here.”

Isaac looks up at Scott and Derek, feeling shocked and a little bit stupid.

“Listen, I know the three of you are focusing half your energy on resisting your own urges under the full moon, but that puts you at

severe disadvantage to Boyd, who has fully given in. He put the pedal to the floor while you three are barely hitting the speed limit,” Argent says.

“So what do we do?” Derek asks. His arms are crossed and his voice is annoyed. It’s clear he’s just as reluctant to be here as Argent is.

“Focus on your sense of smell,” Argent begins. “Actual wolves are known to track their prey up to a hundred miles a day by scent. A trained hunter can use scent to track them. If the wind is with them, wolves can track a scent by a distance of two miles, which means we can draw him to us... or into a trap.” Argent tosses a rope net at Scott before continuing, “The full moon does give us one advantage. He’ll have a higher heat signature, which makes him easier to spot with infrared.”

The next item Argent deals out is a pair of binoculars each. Isaac catches his easily, turning them over in his hands. He turns a dial and a red light shines from the front.

“Thanks, but,” Derek tosses his pair back, flashing his red eyes, “I’ve got my own.”

“Just remember: we’re not hunting a wild animal. Underneath those impulses is an intelligent human being. Don’t think he can’t rely on that human side,” Argent warns. “It’s suppressed, but it’s there – reminding him how to mask his scent, how to cover his tracks, how to survive.”

Argent leads the three of them up over a cliffside overlooking all of Beacon Hills. He addresses Derek, “When was the last time you saw Boyd?”

“Four months ago,” Derek says. “Right before Gerard kidnapped him.”

Isaac glances between Derek and Argent, wondering if this is the moment when their temporary allegiance fractures.

It doesn’t. Argent plows ahead, “Do you think you have a lock on his scent?”

Derek shakes his head. Isaac is once again reminded of how little Derek and Boyd actually know each other. If Isaac wasn’t so new to all of this, he would probably know Boyd’s scent better. He feels inadequate. It’s frustrating in an all too familiar sort of way.

Argent turns, "Scott, how confident are you in your skills?"

"Honestly," Scott says with a humorless, breathy laugh, "most of the time, I'm trying not to think about all the things I can smell."

That draws a sigh out of Argent, "All right. The problem is when he breaches the woods and hits the residential area. Once he passes the high school, he's right in the middle of Beacon Hills."

"He's not gonna kill everything he sees, is he?" Isaac asks, both concerned and skeptical at this point.

"No," Argent says, "but there is an important difference to recognize: wolves hunt for food, at a certain point, they get full. Boyd is hunting for the pleasure of the kill, for some primal apex predator satisfaction that comes from the ripping of warm bodies to bloody shreds. And who knows when that need gets satiated."

Isaac is pretty sure Argent would shoot him on the spot, no questions asked, if he said this, but he can hear Gerard's teachings in the speech. *Well, a trained werewolf hunter is what they were looking for.*

"We can't kill him," Scott says and he sounds so certain. That's the other thing about Scott. He says his beliefs with such conviction, it's hard not to follow him. He persuades people to follow him, not through manipulation, but through hope and compassion.

"What if we can't catch him?" Derek questions.

"Then maybe we just need to contain him," Argent says, contemplative. "There's no one at the school at night, is there?"

"You want to trap him inside?" Derek guesses.

"If there's somewhere with a strong enough door, no windows or access to the outside," Argent says. Isaac immediately knows the right place.

"What about the boiler room?" Isaac suggests. "It's just one big steel door."

There's a pause as Argent thinks it over, then, sounding unconvinced, clarifies, "You're sure the school's empty?"

"It has to be," Scott reassures. "There can't be anyone there this late, right?"

With a tentative plan in place, the four of them quickly start to get organized, relying on Argent to lead the way. He pulls out a metal stake and slams it into the ground.

“These are ultrasonic emitters. It’s one of the tools we use to corral werewolves, pushing them into a direction we want them to run,” Argent explains. He presses the top of the emitter and immediately a screeching note fills the air. On instinct, Isaac pulls his hands up to cover his ears. “It gives off a high pitch frequency that only they can hear.”

“God, no kidding!” Isaac grunts out, holding his hands tight to his ears.

Argent clicks the emitter again and the sound dissipates. The three werewolves lower their hands. Derek is glowering at Argent, who is doing a great job pretending not to notice. Argent pulls a case of emitters out of his car, distributing them amongst the group.

“These are gonna drive him to the school?” Derek asks.

Isaac rubs at his right ear, which is still ringing. He glances over at Scott and Derek who both seem fine. Typical.

“And then it’s up to you to get him into the basement,” Argent delegates.

“Does anybody else want to rethink the plan where we just, uh, kill him?” Isaac asks, feeling like this is a whole lot of work for a plan that will most likely crumble around them. That tends to be the way of things with these sort of operations.

Scott looks over at Isaac, making eye contact. His expression is painted with disapproval. It makes a funny feeling flare up inside Isaac. Scott says, full of confidence, “It’s going to work.”

Isaac breaks eye contact, fiddling with the emitter Argent handed him.

“It’ll work,” Scott repeats. His heartbeat stays stable, meaning he really does believe it. It’s enough reassurance for Isaac to set aside his doubts and stick to the plan.

Argent slams the trunk of his car closed, and starts telling the wolves which direction to go in. He sends Isaac the farthest distance since he’s the fastest of the three of them. As soon as Isaac has his orders, he takes off running, one emitter in each hand. He sprints as fast as he

can, jumping over stray sticks and rocks. Still worn out from the ice bath, Isaac's lungs burn, but he keeps running.

He stops first in a small clearing where he kneels down and pierces the emitter into the ground. He pauses just long enough to turn it on and check his surroundings, then he takes off again.

Isaac darts through the woods. He should probably be listening for Boyd, but, instead, he just focuses on moving as quickly as non-humanly possible.

Eventually, he breaks through the tree line. Here, Isaac drops the second emitter. The sound makes him wince, so he doesn't linger.

Isaac's final stop is the school. He meets up with Scott at one of the many entrances. Without discussion, they each grab one of the door handles, and together they work to pry them apart. With their combined strength, the doors don't stand a chance. They fly open to reveal a long, dark hall of lockers. Isaac turns to Scott. They nod at each other, signaling that the task is a success and they can move on.

The two of them run off towards their assigned positions. Scott breaks off first, while Isaac keeps running towards the school sign. There, he waits. Isaac listens closely for any sign of Boyd. In the distance, he can hear the werewolf howling. Isaac stands his ground.

Not a full minute later, Isaac picks up on the sound of movement behind him. Isaac focuses his hearing, and recognizes a low grumbling. There's only one thing it could be. Isaac curses his luck. "Oh, great."

Isaac slowly turns around to see Boyd standing behind him. He's fully transformed and posed to attack. His chest heaves with each breath he takes, and he flexes his clawed fingers. Boyd snarls.

Isaac's eyes flash gold as he matches Boyd's position. Before either can strike, a car horn blares and bright headlights approach. Isaac shields his eyes from the light, stumbling slightly. Boyd quickly turns his attention towards Argent's car. Trapped, Boyd takes off towards the part of the school where Isaac knows Derek is positioned.

Once Boyd is inside, all Derek has to do is guide him into the basement and shut the door. The plan is so close to success. Isaac is starting to think it's actually going to work when, suddenly, in an unexpected twist of fate, Boyd surpasses the entrance and leaps up onto the roof. Hopeless desperation fills the air.

Isaac rushes over to rejoin the group, coming to a stop between Scott and Argent just as Derek sprints away in the direction of the rear doors. Scott says in a rush, "Someone has to drive him inside."

"I'll go," Argent says, flashing his taser wand.

"No," Isaac says, shaking his head. "I'm faster." Then he takes off running.

Isaac makes it around to the back of the school in record time, but when he gets there, the job has already been done for him. Boyd is escaping into the school.

Isaac grabs the lock, positioning it over the door handles, and slides it closed. Only when Isaac is certain the door is secured does he chance a glance away. Isaac turns to face the direction Boyd came from. He's expecting to see Derek, but, instead, it's Allison standing before him. She's on top of one of the school buses, holding her bow with practiced ease. They lock eyes. Isaac is fairly certain his surprise is written all over his face. Before he has a chance to say anything, Allison flees.

For a long moment, Isaac just stands there dumbfounded. If any of the others had seen Allison, Isaac is certain they would have gone after her or at least tried to stop her retreat. But not Isaac. He lets her go.

It's not a decision that Isaac really thinks about making, it just happens. Allison is gone before he can properly process her presence, giving him no time to object to her disappearing act. Really, Isaac doesn't see any harm in Allison secretly *helping* them. He probably should have considered telling the others, but what he finds when he returns to the group takes precedence.

"Scott?" Isaac yells as he runs through the open entrance, only to find the premises vacated. There are no signs of Boyd or the others anywhere. Isaac pauses. He can only hope the plan worked.

Isaac feels it when the warm light hits his face. He turns to the window, and with a breath of relief and a half smile, whispers, "The sun's coming up."

It takes Isaac's brain a moment longer to catch up, but once the realization hits him, he's yelling triumphantly, "Scott! The sun's coming up!"

Isaac rushes towards the basement in search of Scott and the others,

ready to share his good news. The instant Isaac opens the door, Scott is tearing into the boiler room. Isaac immediately senses that something is wrong, and quickly follows after him.

Inside, Scott and Isaac find Derek kneeling over Boyd's torn and bloody body. Derek looks up at them with one of the most open expressions Isaac has ever seen on him. He looks exhausted and there's an ever-so-slight manic glint in his eyes.

"There's a teacher," Derek says in lieu of an explanation. Derek sways on his knees. He swallows. "I'll take care of her." Derek pants. "Get him out of here."

Scott and Isaac share a glance, both clearly bewildered. Scott steps forward and Isaac easily follows. When they get closer, Isaac finally notices the ragged movement of Boyd's breathing. He's alive. And he actually looks better off than Derek does. *Huh*. Isaac doesn't quite know what to make of that.

Scott and Isaac pull Boyd up. It's slow work getting him up the basement stairs, but, between the two of them, they manage. Argent is waiting for them outside. He helps them load Boyd's nearly unconscious body into the car. Then he asks, "Where's Derek?"

"There was a teacher. He's taking care of it," Scott says, echoing Derek's previous words.

"Well, then we shouldn't wait around. I'll take you both home," Argent offers.

"Actually, I need to meet Stiles at the hospital. He found something," Scott says.

"Still, I'll drive you," Argent says. Scott looks like he wants to argue, but Argent's tone leaves no room for negotiation. There's a strange dynamic between Scott and Argent that Isaac can't quite put his finger on. Isaac supposes going from enemies to allies will do that to people. Although, technically, Isaac and Scott used to be enemies, and their relationship is nothing like Scott and Argent's. What exactly their relationship is though, Isaac isn't sure.

Scott acquiesces and climbs in the passenger seat. Isaac gets in the back with Boyd, who is slowly starting to stir.

They go to the loft first. Argent waits in the car while Scott and Isaac help Boyd into the building. Boyd is able to walk now, but only with

their support. At the elevators, Scott pauses, “Are you going to be okay with him by yourself?”

“Peter’s probably upstairs,” Isaac says, which isn’t really an answer. Scott gives Isaac a knowing look. Isaac sighs, “I’m all right. I’m sure Derek won’t be long.”

“It’s just—” Scott stammers.

Isaac tilts his head, feeling confused at Scott’s sudden loss for words. Scott always seems so composed, and, while Isaac knows that isn’t the case, it’s strange to see him like this. “I’m fine, Scott.”

Scott nods. “Yeah.”

Scott still looks like he wants to say more, but the sun is really rising now and Boyd is staggering. So Scott goes, and Isaac guides Boyd into the elevator. The doors creak closed. Usually, Isaac hates elevators. He takes the stairs whenever he’s alone, but, with Boyd’s heavy weight against his side, Isaac doesn’t feel so scared.

Halfway up, Boyd murmurs, “You found me.”

Isaac huffs a small laugh, “Don’t sound so surprised.”

“I’m not,” Boyd says in that easy, matter of fact way of his. “I’m grateful.”

—

Scott calls Isaac the next day – well, it’s the same day, technically, but it’s well into the evening now.

“*How’s Boyd doing?*” Scott asks.

Isaac shrugs, “Derek’s an alpha, so the wounds are taking longer to heal, but he’ll be okay soon. He wants to go home, I think.”

“*Am I a horrible person if I sort of forgot that Boyd was, by definition, literally kidnapped?*” Scott asks.

Isaac huffs a small laugh. He gets what Scott means. They were rescuing Boyd, but had completely forgotten he actually had a family to go home to. One that may or may not be looking for him. Isaac says, “He tried to kill us. His fault or not, I think that gives you a good enough excuse.”

There's a quiet moment on the other end of the phone. Then Scott takes a deep breath, and says, *"Listen, I called to tell you what Stiles found."*

"It's bad, isn't it?" Isaac asks.

"Human sacrifices."

"What?" Isaac asks. He heard Scott perfectly fine.

"Stiles thinks it's human sacrifices," Scott says. Then, *"Virgins, actually."*

Virgins... Well, Isaac is screwed. "Oh."

"The three bodies – Heather, the girl in the woods, and the boy at the pool – they were all killed the same way. Stiles called it the three fold death," Scott explains.

"And you believe him?" Isaac asks.

"I don't know. But it means that Boyd might not have killed someone. So."

Oh... Now Scott calling makes a lot more sense. Isaac pitches his voice lower, just in case Boyd is listening in, "Was I supposed to tell him he might have killed someone? Because I had no plans to."

Scott laughs, although it sounds joyless. *"Well, definitely don't say anything now. We have to find out what really happened first."*

"Sure," Isaac says, but he can't help but think: how the hell are we going to do that?

Unleashed

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 4

Word count: 7,671

Warning: canon child abuse

Isaac doesn't mean to be late. It's Derek's fault actually. Isaac was about to leave for the bus when Derek told him he would give him a ride. Apparently, he had something he needed to do at the school. Isaac asked what it was, but, of course, Derek stayed silent. Derek took forever preparing to leave, and when they finally did, Isaac knew he was going to be late.

Now, he slides into the locker, trying to go unnoticed. Coach spots him immediately. "Mr. Lahey! Happy to have you back. Not happy that you're late."

"Sorry, Coach," Isaac says, making his way to his locker.

"I'll remind you that cross country is not optional for lacrosse players," Coach starts his tyrant, but Isaac easily blocks him out. Isaac quickly changes into his cross country gear, hanging his cardigan in his locker alongside some of his other clothes. Isaac may be welcome to live at Derek's, but he still tries to be aware of how much space he takes up.

Scott approaches Isaac, and, spotting the extra clothes, asks, "Living out of your locker?"

Isaac tilts his head in confusion, "I'm living at Derek's. I thought you knew that."

"I guessed, but... didn't want to assume," Scott says with a shrug, then, "Where do you sleep?"

"On the couch," Isaac says, "It's a good couch."

Scott's face takes on an expression that Isaac can't quite place, but if he had to guess, he would probably say it's somewhere between sympathy and concern. Luckily for Isaac, Coach yells at them to get out on the field, putting an end to the conversation. Isaac slams his

locker closed, quickly pulls his shoes on, and heads out.

Once he's out on the field, Isaac takes the time to kneel down and tie his shoes. He's tying the last knot when he feels a looming presence behind him. In his peripheral vision, Isaac can't believe what he's seeing. The werewolf twins are approaching him from either side.

The whistle blows, but Isaac is frozen in shock. Anger swells up inside Isaac. He can't believe they have the audacity to show up here after everything. After they killed the girl who saved his life. The thought makes Isaac spring into action.

Before Isaac can move, a hand lands on his shoulder. Isaac turns to see Scott. Scott must sense that something is happening because his voice comes as both a warning and a question, "Isaac!"

"It's them," Isaac says vaguely. He shrugs Scott's hand off his shoulder and takes off running after the twins. Distantly, Isaac is aware of Scott calling after him, but Isaac is too consumed by his anger to listen.

Isaac sprints ahead, easily breaking through the crowd. Isaac can see the twins. He refuses to let them get away. He runs as fast he can, arms pumping and wind whipping past him. Isaac is gaining on the twins. His height and slim build are an advantage when it comes to werewolf super-speed. He can catch them. He just has to keep running.

Up ahead, there's a bend in the trail. The twins turn the corner before Isaac does, momentarily going out of sight. Isaac expects them to come back into view as soon as he rounds the curve, but the twins are nowhere to be found.

Isaac comes to a steady stop. He looks in every direction, but there isn't a single trace of them. Confusion and frustration battle for claim over Isaac.

Then, out of nowhere, a body slams into Isaac from behind. Isaac is thrown off the trail, rolling down a slope and into a divot of leaves.

"*Isaac,*" a disembodied voice croons. Isaac's eyes dart every which way, trying to reorient himself and find the source of the voice. "*Isaac. You still thinking about the girl?*" Isaac gets to his feet, his heart rate starting to elevate. "*You didn't even know her name, did you?*" Anger pools in Isaac's gut. He does a full body spin, still searching for the twins. "*Doesn't matter now since we ripped her apart.*" Isaac fills with fury. He jumps up from the divot, back onto the same level ground as

the trail.

Immediately, the twins grab hold of Isaac, trapping him between them. Isaac grunts and struggles, but he's no match against two alpha werewolves, not strength wise, at least. Isaac is pulled up onto his knees. Each twin grabs one of his arms; the one on his right pins his arm to his back, while the leftward twin has his arm stretched outward. They both have a tight hold on the back of his neck. Isaac doesn't have the leverage to break free. He's well and truly trapped.

The twin to the right uses his grip on Isaac's neck to tilt his head back, sneering down at Isaac. "Ethan, I always forget, how many bones in the human body?"

The other twin, Ethan, Isaac assumes, grins back. "I don't know. Let's count."

Ethan scrunches up his face and tightens his grip on Isaac's wrist. Isaac braces himself for the pain, but it never comes. Scott, appearing out of nowhere, punches Ethan in the jaw. Isaac hears the crunch of bone breaking as Ethan is knocked to the ground.

"That's one," Scott says.

In the commotion, the unnamed twin loses his grip on Isaac. Isaac scrambles to his feet, readying himself for the inevitable fight. His eyes glow golden, his fangs slide into place, and his claws extend. With Scott on his side, Isaac feels much more hopeful about his chances of victory. There's a chorus of growls and snarls as the four werewolves stand off against each other.

Then, a girl's scream echoes through the woods.

Isaac and Scott quickly shift back to human form before running towards the direction of the noise. It's easy to find the crowd of people, all circled around one tree. The pair slide to a stop next to Stiles. There's a body. A man, who looks not much older than them, is tied to the tree by his throat and covered in his own blood.

In his shock, Isaac takes a step backward, moving slightly behind Scott. Isaac pants, trying to catch his breath. He can't take his eyes off the body.

"It's him, isn't it?" Stiles asks.

They don't have to wait long for the sheriff and his deputies to come

running up the hill. Sheriff Stilinski orders, “Hey! Get out of the way! Get back! Get this area cordoned off before they trample every piece of evidence.”

The deputy yells, “Back up! Everyone, back!”

“Get these kids out of here!” the sheriff shouts. Stiles doesn’t waste a second before he approaches his dad. He grabs Stilinski’s shoulder, shepherding him over to the body.

“Dad, just come here. Look, look,” Stiles says, pointing at the way the body is strangled. “Look at it. It’s the same as the others. You see?”

“Yeah, I see that,” the sheriff says, sounding exasperated. “Do me a favor. Go back to school, yeah?”

Stiles, decently chastened, goes speechless. The sheriff turns his attention away from Stiles, saying, “Coach, can you give us a hand here?”

“You heard the man! Nothing to see here!” Coach yells, “Probably just some homeless kid.”

Isaac bristles. Sometimes Isaac wonders how much other people will care when he dies. He really *is* just a homeless kid.

“Coach...” Scott interrupts.

“Yeah?”

“He was a senior,” Scott informs him.

Coach lets out a sigh. He pauses for a moment before asking, “He wasn’t on the team, was he?”

“Kyle! Oh god, Kyle!” Whatever Scott was going to say is interrupted by a girl rushing towards the body. Her screams are devastating to hear, but all Isaac can focus on is the fact that the twins have now joined the crowd.

At the sheriff’s insistence, Isaac, Stiles, and Scott branch off from the group. As they walk away, Isaac asks, “You see the way the twins looked at him?”

“Yeah, like they had no idea what happened?” Stiles says.

“Ah, nah, they knew,” Isaac says confidently. He spares another glance

at the twins. There's something about the way they looked at the body that Isaac doesn't like.

"The kid was strangled with a garrote, all right? Am I the only one noticing the lack of 'werewolfitude' in these murders?" Stiles questions. Stiles has the habit of speaking like his opinions are fact. It's frustrating beyond belief.

"Oh, you think it's a coincidence they turn up and then people start dying?" Isaac counters.

"Well, no, but I still don't think it's them," Stiles says.

The trio stop walking as the debate reaches a stalemate. Isaac looks at Scott expectantly, waiting for him to weigh in on the conversation.

"Scott?" Isaac presses. Scott's gaze snaps over to Isaac. Stiles and Isaac give Scott their full attention, both eager to hear what he has to say on the matter. "How 'bout you?"

"I don't know yet," Scott admits.

"You... don't know yet?" Stiles repeats, eyebrows raised in incredulity.

Scott turns towards Stiles, gesturing at Isaac when he says, "Well, he's got a point. Seriously, dude, human sacrifices?"

"Scott, your eyes turn into yellow glow sticks, okay? Hair literally grows out of your face, and then will immediately disappear, and if I were to stab you right now, it would just magically heal, but you're telling me that you're having trouble grasping human sacrifices?" Stiles rambles, hands flailing the entire time.

Scott sighs, turning back to Isaac, "That's a good point too."

"I don't care, all right," Isaac says, losing all patience. "They killed that kid, they killed the girl that saved me. And I'm gonna kill them too."

Isaac stalks off. The girl, whoever she was, died saving Isaac's life, and no one else seems to care. She might have been the only person in the world who was willing to risk everything for Isaac, someone she didn't even know. Isaac might not know her name, but he's going to avenge her. It's the least he can do.

In their next class, Scott tries to convince Isaac to back down.

“They’re here for a reason. Give me a chance to figure it out before you do anything. Okay?” Scott reasons. When Isaac ignores him, Scott pleads, “Isaac.”

Isaac keeps his eyes trained forward and jaw clenched tight. Scott’s lack of interest in the girl and his unwillingness to act is only serving to bolster Isaac’s anger. Isaac feels unheard. It’s infuriating. He hates it.

Danny is answering a question, but all Isaac can hear is the pounding of his own heartbeat. His rage is taking over, filling him up and up and up, threatening to burst out at any moment.

“Mr. Harris, can I use the bathroom please?” Isaac interrupts. He’s desperate to get out from under Scott’s watchful gaze. His attention is too much. Isaac feels like he’s going to explode. He’s so angry.

As soon as Harris gestures to the door, Isaac is up and out of his seat. He exits the room as fast as possible. All Isaac intended to do was get some air, let off some steam. He wasn’t expecting the twins to be waiting for him. Well, a fight would definitely be a good outlet for Isaac’s rage.

Isaac strides forward, but is stopped in his tracks when one of the twins punches the other. The previous aggravation starts to drain out of Isaac’s body, quickly being replaced by confusion. Despite the blood pooling in his mouth, the beaten up twin smirks at Isaac. Isaac’s own mouth drops open in shock.

He should do something. Isaac should *do* something, but he’s frozen in place. His hands form small fists at his side, clenching and unclenching. Isaac looks around the empty hallway as the twin continues to bash the other, spraying blood across the floor. Isaac should do something. Anything.

The twin rams his brother’s head into the lockers, then, without a pause, tosses him at Isaac’s feet. Before Isaac can do anything, the door to Harris’ classroom swings open.

“What is this? What’s going on?” Harris questions. When Isaac looks back, the other twin has vanished.

“You all right?” Danny asks the beaten twin. Isaac thinks that must mean it’s Ethan.

“He just – He just came at me,” Ethan says, playing up the wincing of pain.

“Isaac. What the hell did you do?” Harris asks, turning on him. The realization of what just happens starts to sink in, and Isaac can’t feel anything other than resigned annoyance. He’s been framed. It’s a familiar feeling for Isaac.

“You’ve just earned yourself lunchtime detention,” Harris says. He always sounds so smug when doling out punishments.

Isaac just nods. He’s more worried about the angry look on Scott’s face. The students start filing back into Harris’ classroom. Isaac takes the opportunity to grab Scott’s wrist, trying to clear his name. He blurts out, “Scott, it wasn’t me.”

“I know. I was listening. But I warned you not to do anything.”

Oh. That’s worse. Isaac drops his hold on Scott’s wrist. He huffs, “Well, *someone* has to do something.”

Isaac doesn’t wait for Scott’s response, he just ducks back into class.

—

When the bell finally rings, Scott follows Isaac to his locker. Isaac tries to ignore Scott, but he’s persistent. “Don’t let it bother you. It’s just lunchtime detention. If all they want right now is to piss you off, then don’t give in. They’re just trying to get to you.”

Isaac unlocks his locker, noticing Aiden and Lydia on the other side of the hallway. Isaac mutters, “It’s not just me.”

Scott follows Isaac’s gaze over to the pair. While Scott focuses his attention on Aiden and Lydia, Isaac focuses his on Scott. Isaac watches as Scott’s jaw clenches. Scott’s entire expression turns dark. He’s practically radiating anger.

Feeling Isaac’s eyes on him, Scott says, “What?”

“Now, they’re getting to you,” Isaac smirks. He shouldn’t be pleased by the fact, but he can’t help it. He wants Scott to get on board with taking down the twins, and this seems like a step in the right direction. Isaac huffs a small laugh and walks away.

Isaac sits through his next class, but he can hardly pay attention. All

he can think about are the twins: where they are, what they are doing, and what they are planning. It's consuming Isaac's focus.

So much so that when he returns to Harris' classroom for his lunchtime detention, he doesn't notice when he chooses the seat directly in front of Allison. Not until Mr. Harris starts assigning them tasks.

"The two of you will wash all the boards in this hall," then, "Reshelving the library," and finally, "Restocking the janitor's closet."

Isaac looks behind him. As they make eye contact, Allison drops her pen and Isaac silently curses his own misfortune. He stands, approaching the teacher, "Uh, Mr. Harris? Um... does it have to be with her?"

"Now that I know you prefer not to... yes. You have to be with her," and there's that smug tone Isaac is so used to.

Isaac heaves a deep sigh. "Great."

Harris points them in the direction of the replacement supplies, and he and Allison get going. Allison grabs as many packages of paper towels as she can carry while Isaac takes the dolly stacked with boxes. They walk in uncomfortable silence towards the janitor's closet.

Isaac wheels the dolly inside, then grabs the box from the top. He turns to place it on the shelf, but immediately bumps into Allison. She gives a quiet, "Oh, sorry."

The collision, as minor as it was, draws Isaac's attention to the small size of the room. With the dolly blocking his exit and Allison on his other side, Isaac starts to feel trapped. He picks up a bottle of cleaning supplies, but continues to check his exits. His breathing speeds up minutely.

"Are you okay?" Allison asks.

Isaac brushes the panic off his shoulders, feeling annoyed that she noticed. He continues stocking supplies as he says, "Yeah, yeah, I'm just... not a big fan of small spaces."

There's a brief moment of silence, then Allison asks, "Can I ask you a question?"

"Do you have to?" Isaac fires back. It's maybe a bit harsh, but that

tends to be Isaac's way. Besides, with the way Allison has treated him in the past, he's not sure he owes her any kindness.

"I guess not..." Allison pauses in her reshelving, turning to look at Isaac. Isaac categorically ignores her. "I'm gonna ask you anyway."

That makes Isaac stop and look at her, almost incredulous. Her voice is earnest when she asks, "Did you tell anyone that I was at the school the other night?"

"Oh, was I supposed to?" Isaac asks, though his voice lacks its usual bite.

Allison's lips quirk up into a small smile, "It would make me really happy if you didn't."

"Yeah, well," Isaac says, resuming his task, "you being happy really isn't a big priority of mine. Since you stabbed me... twenty times... with knives."

"They were actually Chinese ring daggers but—" Allison pauses.

"Oh," Isaac intones.

"—sorry," Allison continues.

"Was that – Was that an apology?" Isaac asks, fighting off a smile.

"Would you accept an apology?" Allison counters, her eyebrows are raised like she already knows the answer.

Isaac chuckles, "Uh—"

The door slams closed.

Isaac's laughter and the almost pleasant banter instantly die off. The room goes dark. The small box in Isaac's hand falls to the floor. Isaac hastily maneuvers himself around the dolly toward the exit. Isaac reaches for the doorknob. It turns in his grip, but the door won't budge.

"No, no, no, no..." Isaac murmurs, desperately twisting the door handle to no avail.

Allison moves closer to Isaac, "Uh, maybe it locked from the outside."

Isaac pushes against the door. It gives slightly, but still won't open.

“No, I think there’s something against it.”

Isaac continues to rattle the handle.

“Okay, okay, okay,” Isaac mutters as he strips his cardigan off. He paces in the small space, trying to alleviate the rising panic. Isaac is being hit with wave after wave of fresh fear. It’s everywhere and there’s no relief. *Out. Out. Out.*

“Okay, uh, all right. Just relax,” Allison says, but Isaac can barely hear her.

“No,” Isaac whimpers. The walls are really closing in now. He’s suffocating.

“Isaac, relax,” Allison repeats. It bounces right off of Isaac. All he can think about is how small the room is. He needs to get out, he needs to escape. *Out. Out. Out.*

Isaac starts knocking on the door frantically. He breathes as deeply as he can, trying to stave off the incoming panic.

“Isaac,” Allison warns. Her voice is starting to sound increasingly scared. It’s not helping.

“Come on. Come on.” Isaac pleads, gripping onto the doorframe. Isaac knocks harder on the door. “Come on.”

Isaac starts repeatedly pounding on the door as hard as he can. Allison might still be speaking, but it’s all white noise now. Isaac is completely gone. The panic has taken over.

“Come on!” Isaac wails. Visions of the freezer start to flash before his eyes. Isaac can barely breathe. It’s too much. The memories are so vivid, he can’t tell what’s real anymore. He can hear the rattling of the chain, he can feel walls touching him on all sides. Isaac’s throat burns from the screaming and his fists ache from the punching, but he can’t stop. He can’t stop. *Out. Out. Out.*

Suddenly, Isaac goes still. The werewolf part – the part that makes him strong, the part that saved him from his dad’s abuse – takes over. There’s no cognitive thought when he rounds on Allison. It’s all instinct. It’s all self defense.

Even when the door is opened and Isaac is thrown to the ground, he still doesn’t register that he’s safe. He keeps mindlessly fighting back.

Then, there's a hand on his throat and Scott's voice breaking through the delirium, "*Isaac!*"

As if a switch has been flipped, Isaac goes pliant. His growls quiet and his eyes dim back to their usual blue. Isaac slides back, propping himself up against the nearest wall.

"I'm okay, I'm fine," Allison is saying.

As Isaac comes back to awareness, his panic is exchanged for guilt. There's a scratch up Allison's arm, and it's Isaac's doing. His eyes are wet with tears as he pleads, "I'm sorry, I didn't – I didn't mean to do that."

"I'm okay," Allison repeats.

"I'm so sorry," Isaac gasps. He's panting and his head is spinning, but he needs them to know it was an accident.

"It's not his fault," Allison says.

"I know," Scott agrees. At the admission, Isaac starts to calm. Scott continues, "I guess now we know they want to do more than get you angry. They want to get someone hurt."

It's exactly the validation that Isaac was looking for. Scott finally recognizes the threat the twins pose. It's all the comfort Isaac needs for the last dregs of his panic to drift away, down the drain. Isaac looks up at him, asking, "So are we gonna do something?"

"Yeah," Scott says. "I'm gonna get them angry. Really angry."

From Isaac's spot on the floor, looking up at Scott, he suddenly notices the new tattoo on his arm. Two black bands, one slightly thicker than the other, wrapped around his bicep. The sleeve of Scott's t-shirt partially covers the ink, but from this angle Isaac can see it clearly. *Huh*. A tattoo isn't necessarily out of character for Scott, but Isaac is still caught off guard by it. It looks good though. Isaac will have to ask about it another time.

Now though, Isaac stands up, readying himself for the task at hand. He brushes any dirt from his jeans, runs his fingers through his hair, and wipes at his eyes. It's then that Isaac realizes his sweater is still in the janitor's closet. "Um."

Scott and Allison both look at him. Their eyes are both so kind.

“Sorry, it’s... Do you–” Isaac huffs. This shouldn’t be as embarrassing as it is. “Could you, uh, hand me my sweater? I don’t–”

Before Isaac can ramble himself into his grave, Allison reaches inside the closet and grabs the sweater for him. While she’s there, she digs around and finds a small first aid kit. She tosses the cardigan to Isaac then starts dressing her wound. Isaac feels a jolt of guilt, but ignores it in favor of getting back to business.

Isaac pulls the sweater on, asking, “So how do we make them angry?”

“Aiden framed you, so let’s frame him,” Scott says like it’s obvious.

Isaac frowns, not following. “How do we do that?”

Allison interrupts, “Wait, catch me up here, what happened?”

Scott explains how Ethan and Aiden staged the fight which gave Isaac lunchtime detention. All the while, Allison is wrapping her forearm in a small piece of gauze and Coban.

“Okay, so,” Allison says, “They have the obnoxious motorcycles, right?”

Scott’s eyebrows furrow and his lips form a small pout. Isaac holds back a laugh, “Yeah, that’s them.”

“Well, why don’t we hot-wire one?” Allison says, barely concealing her grin of excitement.

The plan comes together quickly after that. The first step is to take parts from one of the twin’s bikes. Scott, having knowledge of motorcycles, is able to do so with efficient ease. He places the pieces in his backpack, wishes Allison and Isaac good luck, and then rushes off to class.

Next, Allison starts to hot-wire the second bike. Isaac keeps a lookout while Allison kneels beside it. Isaac watches as oblivious students walk right past them. Mostly, he’s just keeping an eye out for any teachers.

As the minutes pass, Isaac starts to get antsy. He looks down at Allison, asking, “How long is this gonna take?”

Allison gets up and tries the engine. It starts. They share a small grin before Isaac climbs on. Isaac, having no qualms about getting in

trouble if he's caught, is the one tasked with driving the bike into the school.

"Pull back with your left hand, kick down to put in gear. Front brake. Throttle." Allison's hand covers Isaac's as she demonstrates. (Isaac dutifully suppresses the instinct to jump at the sudden physical contact.) Then, "Back brake for stopping. Try not to crash."

"Yeah," Isaac breathes, "been there, done that."

Allison snaps a quick picture of Isaac, which then gets sent to Scott. She flashes him a thumbs up before quickly making her way back towards the school. Isaac waits until she props the doors open before he pulls the helmet on and starts the engine.

Allison's directions were quick, but easy enough to follow. Isaac drives the motorcycle up on the sidewalk and then through the open doors. Once inside the main hallway, Isaac revs the engine. The sound echoes throughout the school, loud enough the twins will definitely hear it.

In mere seconds, Aiden is racing down the hallway towards Isaac. Isaac uses the front brake to bring the motorcycle to a stop right in front of him. Aiden shouts, "Get off my bike!"

Isaac pulls the helmet off, sets it down, and says, "No problem."

Isaac uses the handlebar as leverage to flip himself up and over Aiden's back. Isaac walks backwards, easily blending into the emerging crowd. Isaac watches in satisfaction as the realization hits Aiden.

Scott and Allison slide into the crowd, joining Isaac. They watch as Ms. Blake marches up to Aiden, saying, "You have got to be kidding me. You do realize this is going to result in a suspension."

Isaac doesn't bother to hide his smirk of victory as the twins glare at them. Isaac turns to look at his fellow conspirators. They smile at each other, sharing in their celebration.

With it having been their last class of the day, it's not long before Isaac is back in the locker room gathering up his things.

"Hey," Scott says, jogging in to join Isaac. "Aiden's suspended for two weeks. It's not much, *but* at least they won't be forming super-wolf for a little while."

“Yeah... I still think we should’ve killed ‘em,” Isaac says.

“We’ll kill them next time,” Scott says, smiling.

Isaac chuckles as he continues to swap out the clothes in his locker and lacrosse bag.

“Uh. How do you get to Derek’s?” Scott asks. His voice sounds like he’s trying to be nonchalant, but he doesn’t quite pull it off. Isaac’s smile drops a bit.

“I, uh – I walk,” Isaac closes his locker, “To the bus stop.”

There’s a pause, and Isaac thinks it’s about to get awkward, but then Scott is saying, “Well, let me give you a ride instead.”

“Really?” Isaac asks, baffled by Scott’s kindness.

“Yeah, it’s no problem,” Scott says. His voice is so genuine Isaac doesn’t have to listen to his heart to know he’s telling the truth.

“Yeah,” Isaac says, his voice coming out softer than he intended. Isaac thinks maybe he should say something more to express his gratitude, but Scott just starts leading the way out of the locker room. Isaac grabs his bag and follows.

As they walk down the hallway, Isaac says, “Nice tattoo by the way.”

Isaac watches as Scott’s expression lights up, “Thanks, man.”

Scott’s smile is infectious, Isaac easily grins back. He asks, “When did you get it?”

“Derek actually helped me with it, back at the Hale house before school started? He had to burn the ink into my skin, it hurt like hell,” Scott says, laughing lightly at the memory.

“Ouch,” Isaac winces. “Does it mean something?”

“Everyone keeps asking me that,” Scott says. He doesn’t sound annoyed, more so contemplative. “It’s hard for me to explain. It has meaning, but it’s nothing specific, I guess? I trace the circles with my fingers a lot, but... I don’t know.”

Isaac, thinking he understands what Scott means, says, “It has meaning because you gave it meaning, by drawing it and by getting it tattooed.”

“Yeah,” Scott says, nodding and smiling.

A comfortable silence falls over the pair as they head towards the school exit. They’re walking down the steps when Isaac says, “I wish I could’ve seen the twins’ faces. Did they look seriously pissed?”

Scott laughs, “Oh yeah.”

The twins materialize in front of them. They’re wearing matching expressions of anger, chests heaving with it.

“Kind of like that,” Scott says.

The twins start to strip off their shirts. Scott glances at Isaac in confusion, but Isaac knows what’s coming. *Super-wolf*.

The transformation is just as mind boggling and grotesque as the first time Isaac witnessed it. Except this time Isaac is fully conscious, so it might actually be worse. Aiden slams his hand into Ethan’s back, and they start to merge together. There’s a cacophony of bones crunching and grinding as Ethan’s back adjusts to make room for Aiden’s presence. Ethan’s body seems to swallow Aiden’s, his back almost bubbling as they mix together.

Their conjoined form looks up at Isaac and Scott just as the two sides of their heads are slotting together. The combined twins growl.

Isaac drops his bag and rolls up his sleeves. “We can take him.”

“Are you kidding?” Scott asks, voice full of disbelief. Scott grabs Isaac’s shoulder as he turns to run, yelling, “Isaac!”

Isaac quickly abandons the plan to attack and follows Scott. They make it all of three feet before the combined twins grab them by their necks. Isaac grunts in pain as he’s hoisted off of the ground. Isaac squirms, kicking his feet to try to free himself from the super-wolf’s clutches. The combined twins bash Scott and Isaac together, the impact of which makes Isaac wince and his head burst into pain. Isaac and Scott are tossed back down the hallway. Isaac rolls onto his back, slowly sliding away from the monstrous form.

A repetitive tapping noise draws Isaac’s attention. Isaac turns his head, watching as a man walks past him, hitting a white cane against the floor with each step.

Silence falls over the hallway. The presence of the man is domineering

in every way. The combined twins immediately go still, separating much more naturally than they merged.

Isaac is helpless to do anything but watch as the man uncaps his cane, revealing a sharp, pointed end. It glistens in the fluorescent light of the hallway. The man swipes the cane through the air, slapping the twins across the face in quick succession. Scott winces at the movement, but Isaac stays perfectly still.

Then, the twins step to the side, creating a path for the man to walk through. Obediently, they follow him.

As soon as they're out of ear shot, Isaac asks, "Who the hell is that?"

"Deucalion," Scott says ominously.

Isaac slowly moves to stand, still staring off in the direction the alphas left in. It's strange to be putting a face to the name Isaac has been hearing for months. It's a name with a reputation, one that inspires fear in others. The real deal is much more subtly terrifying than Isaac expected. Deucalion is unassuming, but, still, he commands power.

Isaac grabs his bag from the floor. "Should we be doing something?"

"No. Not today," Scott says, shaking his head and getting up alongside Isaac. Scott grabs his own bag, and asks, "You still want that ride?"

"If it's okay with you," Isaac says.

"Of course," Scott says easily.

Scott has a spare helmet (because of course he does) that he hands to Isaac. Before Isaac puts it on he says, "The bus stop is—"

Scott cuts him off with a smile, "I'll take you to the loft. It's no big deal."

Scott says it so easily that Isaac can't find it in himself to protest. Scott is so casually kind sometimes that Isaac doesn't know how to handle it. So he just puts the helmet on.

It's a little bit awkward climbing on the back of Scott's smaller motorcycle, especially since Isaac has his duffel bag with him, but it's not bad. It's manageable. And, more than anything, Isaac just feels grateful.

The ride to Derek's loft goes smoother than any of Isaac's other

motorcycle rides, which, granted, isn't saying much, but Isaac feels safe the entire time. He holds tight around Scott's middle and enjoys the freeing feeling of wind rushing past him. Even better though, is how quickly they arrive. Isaac, who is so accustomed to his usual long trek, has to conceal his surprise behind the helmet's visor when they pull up in front of the loft in less than fifteen minutes.

Isaac dismounts the bike and slips the helmet off. He hands it to Scott, and, as sincerely as he can manage, says, "Thank you."

Scott slides the visor of his helmet up and says, "Anytime."

Isaac smiles and turns to enter the building.

Inside the loft, Isaac is met with a palpable tension and the faint smell of lingering blood. Something happened here. Derek is nowhere to be seen, but when he focuses his hearing, Isaac picks up on the quiet rhythm of his heartbeat from the upper room. Isaac rolls his shoulders, attempting to brush away the feeling of foreboding that has settled there. Instead of worrying about the strained atmosphere, Isaac buries himself in his homework.

—

Things come to a head a few hours later. Isaac's homework has been packed away, the sun has set, and rain has started pouring outside. Derek has been hidden away the entire time, which isn't that unusual, but now he makes his appearance.

Derek pointedly doesn't look at Isaac. He keeps his back to Isaac, turning to face the window and spinning an empty glass in his hand. Without any preamble, Derek says, "You can't stay here anymore."

The words don't hit Isaac at first. "What?"

"You can't stay here anymore," Derek reiterates, voice firm. He's still not looking at Isaac.

Isaac stands up from his spot on the couch as his world starts to crumble around him. Sure, Derek isn't the best person, but he was still someone Isaac could depend on. He gave Isaac the bite and somewhere to stay when his dad died. He's been good to Isaac. Not nice, certainly not kind, but not cruel either. Not like this.

Apparently, Derek's decency had been conditional.

“Are you serious?” Isaac asks, there’s a hint of disbelieving laughter in his voice.

Again, Derek repeats, “You can’t stay here anymore.”

“Ah, I–” Isaac stammers, “I don’t get it. Did something happen?”

“It’s just not going to work with you here,” Derek says, which really makes absolutely no sense. What’s not going to work? What has changed in the past twelve hours since Derek drove Isaac to school that morning?

Isaac’s world isn’t just crumbling, it’s spinning out of control. He leans against one of the many pillars in the loft, trying to stay present in the conversation.

“It’s too much,” Derek is saying, which is entirely unfair. Derek *offered* Isaac the bite, he *offered* him the place to stay. Isaac is Derek’s beta, he’s his responsibility. Derek is facing the consequences of his own misguided decision to create a pack out of broken teenagers. It’s not fair.

“I need you out tonight,” Derek says like it’s nothing. Like he isn’t ripping Isaac apart. He’s still not looking at Isaac. He’s still spinning that stupid glass.

Isaac can’t believe this. He scoffs, nearly laughs, “Where am I supposed to go?”

Derek knows Isaac has no one. Derek knows because he did his research. The complete and utter lack of people in Isaac’s life was part of what made him the perfect candidate. Isaac is the perfect, broken beta until, suddenly, he’s too much.

“Somewhere else,” Derek says. The storm is picking up outside. The thunder is mocking him.

“Did I do something wrong, Derek?” Isaac asks, unable to shake the feeling that this is some sick form of punishment. Isaac thought they were past the point of breaking bones for talking back, but Isaac must have done something. That must be what this is. It’s always a punishment. That’s what Isaac knows.

Finally, *finally*, Derek turns to look at Isaac. He’s merciless when he says, “You’re doing something wrong right now by not leaving.”

“Oh, come on,” Isaac says. He feels like a child again, pleading for the bare minimum, begging for his basic needs to be met. It’s humiliating and demoralizing, but Isaac is desperate.

“Just get out,” Derek says, voice harsh.

“Derek, please,” Isaac implores. He knows it won’t work. Derek isn’t compassionate or empathetic. Derek is selfish and cold. Isaac should have known eventually that would be turned on him. He’s been living on borrowed time for months. Isaac should have known that. He should have seen this coming.

“Get out.” Derek repeats.

“Come on,” Isaac laughs again, his influx of emotions needing a way out.

“Go!” Derek yells, throwing the glass at Isaac’s head. Isaac ducks as glass shatters all around him. His reflexes are faster than they once were, so he comes out unharmed, but a sinking feeling settles in his stomach. This is all too familiar. Even the downpour is the same. Isaac escaped one abusive household only to land himself in another.

Isaac resigns himself to his fate. He turns around to face Derek, giving him the most scathing look he can manage. Then, Isaac grabs his bag and leaves. He doesn’t bother to check that he has all his belongings. He doesn’t bother to say any last words. He doesn’t give Derek the satisfaction of seeing him scramble or hearing his voice break. He just leaves.

Isaac sprints down the stairs and out into the rain. By now, no buses will be running, but Isaac doesn’t even think about that. He just runs. There’s only one place for him to go anyway.

Instinct leads Isaac to the home of the one person who has shown him unconditional kindness, the one person that has made Isaac feel safe, the one person who might be selfless enough to allow Isaac to stay.

Instinct leads Isaac to Scott McCall’s house.

Isaac pounds on the door, desperate to get out of the storm, both the literal and figurative one. It’s not Scott that opens the door, but Melissa. She looks shocked to see him, but she quickly ushers him inside. Thankfully, she doesn’t question Isaac’s arrival, just says, “Scott’s upstairs.”

She must think Isaac is here, soaking wet on her doorstep, because of some supernatural evil. Isaac supposes that isn't necessarily untrue. Derek might as well be a supernatural evil right now.

Isaac nods at her. He should maybe feel bad about dripping all over her floor, but Isaac doesn't have the capacity for those worries right now. He just feels numb.

Isaac makes his way upstairs, and knocks on Scott's door. Scott's voice calls back saying, "Come in, Mom."

Isaac takes that as permission enough, and swings the door open with a faint creak. Scott turns to him and immediately shock paints his features. Isaac probably looks pathetic; he's drenched through to the bone, his white shirt has gone fully see through, and he's carrying everything he owns in a duffel bag.

"I – I was wondering if I could, uh, ask you a favor," Isaac says.

Scott nods, still seemingly speechless.

"It's... Derek kicked me out, and I didn't know where else to go, and you can say no, but I–"

"Derek kicked you out?" Scott asks, putting a stop to Isaac's rambling.

"Yeah, uh, he – I don't–" Isaac stammers, unsure how to explain a situation that makes absolutely no sense to him.

Scott stands up, falling into his usual leadership role with ease, "It's okay. We'll get you dry first, then we can talk about it."

Isaac nods. Gratitude wells up in his chest, and then in his eyes, and then he's crying in Scott McCall's bedroom. Isaac's response is to freeze up. Scott, being the incredible person he is, doesn't comment on it.

Instead, he gently takes Isaac's bag from his hold. Isaac watches as Scott assesses the state of his soaking wet clothes. Scott sets the bag down on the floor, moving to his dresser where he grabs a dry pair of sweatpants and a green hoodie. Scott hands them over to Isaac, directs him to his bathroom, and says, "I'll be right back just... get changed and then we'll talk."

Isaac just nods again, watching as Scott leaves the room. Isaac follows Scott's instructions and steps into the bathroom. He leaves the door

cracked open and strips out of his wet clothes. He's not entirely sure what to do with them, so he just sets them on the sink. Isaac moves methodically, not really thinking, just doing. He starts to change into Scott's clothes, finding them to be warm and a little snug. It's nice.

Isaac cries a little bit more then. Scott's so nice. His kindness is overwhelming. Everything is overwhelming. Isaac doesn't regret taking the bite, but he still wishes things were different. He wishes... Isaac shuts down that line of thought. Wishful thinking has never gotten him anywhere.

When Isaac hears Scott's footsteps on the stairs, he hastily wipes his eyes and exits the bathroom.

Scott's eyes are kind and his smile is soft when he enters the room. Everything about Scott's demeanor is soft, actually. Even his voice is soft when he says, "Good news. Mom says you can stay as long as you need."

Isaac swallows down the lump forming in his throat. "Thank you."

Scott nods. He sits down on the edge of his bed, and gestures for Isaac to do the same.

"Your hair is still dripping," Scott comments good-naturedly.

Without thinking, Isaac reaches up to push his hair off of his forehead, "I – I didn't know which towel I could use."

Scott's face falls into an expression that isn't quite pitying, but definitely borders on it. He says, "Dude, any of them."

Isaac just nods. He takes a deep breath. Then, while looking down at his lap – looking at Scott's kind eyes is too much – Isaac starts to speak. "So. Um. I don't really know what happened? Derek was sort of hiding away all afternoon, and then the first thing he did was tell me to leave."

"You didn't have a fight or anything?" Scott asks. Isaac shakes his head. "And he gave no explanation?"

"He said – He said it was too much, it wasn't going to work anymore, and I needed to leave tonight," Isaac says, playing with the strings of the borrowed sweatshirt. "I... I must have done something wrong, but he wouldn't tell me. So."

Isaac finally looks up at Scott to see him frowning deeply. When Scott notices Isaac is looking at him, he says, "It's not your fault."

Isaac shrugs because, really, whose fault could it be if not his?

"No, really, Isaac. I don't know what happened, but you didn't do anything wrong. Derek shouldn't have—" Scott cuts himself off with a sigh.

Isaac wants to know what Scott was going to say, wants to hear his thoughts, but can't bring himself to ask. Instead, he says, "Are you sure it's okay for me to stay here?"

Isaac has no idea where he will go if Scott rescinds his offer, but Isaac has to be certain.

"Yeah, of course, it's no problem," Scott says, then, "Come on, I promised my mom we would come down."

That terrifies Isaac more than it should.

Seeming to sense Isaac's panic, Scott reassures him, "Relax, she's not going to change her mind."

And in the end, Scott is right. Melissa just wants to talk. She asks Isaac what happened, and Isaac gives his unsatisfying response.

"That's it? No fight, no extenuating circumstances?" she questions. Her eyebrows are drawn together. She looks confused, but her expression is still open and gentle.

"No, uh. Everything seemed fine this morning. I—" Isaac pauses, then admits, "I think he must be punishing me for something."

In the blink of an eye, Melissa turns hard and cold. Her eyes lose the kindness they share with her son's. Isaac's brain immediately goes into overdrive trying to figure out what he said wrong, wanting to fix whatever mistake he just made. Melissa rests a hand on Isaac's shoulder, and her voice is caring but firm, when she says, "Isaac, sweetheart, that is no way to treat a sixteen year old."

Isaac blinks repeatedly. There are definitely tears starting to form. Again.

Melissa gives Isaac a warm smile and says, "We have a guest room. You're welcome to stay."

“I – thank you,” Isaac says, wishing he had a better way to express the scope of his appreciation.

And then that’s it. Scott stands and Isaac quickly follows.

“See, she didn’t change her mind,” Scott says when they’re out of ear shot, “You know how moms are, they just want to be in the know.”

Isaac doesn’t tell Scott that he definitely doesn’t *know how moms are*. At least, not really. Not anymore.

Scott leads Isaac into the guest room, which is a big step up from Derek’s couch. Isaac has the brief urge to hug Scott, and, for a moment, he almost does. But then Scott is saying, “Okay, I’ll dry your clothes since they’re soaked–”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“–and you should probably get some rest,” Scott says, completely ignoring Isaac’s objection.

Right on cue, Isaac yawns. Scott laughs. And then Isaac does hug him. Because he wants to and because, maybe, that’s how he can express his appreciation. Scott makes a noise of surprise, but hugs him back.

“Thank you,” Isaac whispers, and then he pulls back.

Scott gives him one of those extra kind, extra Scott McCall smiles, and then says, “Good night, Isaac.”

“Good night, Scott.”

Frayed

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 5

Word count: 3,145

“Stop thinking about it, man,” Isaac says. There’s tension radiating off of Boyd. Isaac can practically hear the wheels turning in his head. It’s setting Isaac’s nerves alight.

“Like you’re not thinking about it too?” Boyd responds, which is fair. Isaac is just as on edge as Boyd is.

“We’ll both stop thinking about it.” Isaac can’t stop thinking about it. Derek is *dead*.

“I can’t,” Boyd says, echoing Isaac’s own thoughts.

“Well, there’s nothing you can do about it either,” Isaac says simply.

“You sure about that?” Boyd questions, glancing back at Ethan. Isaac understands Boyd’s anger, but he just can’t find the fight within himself anymore. It’s like Derek’s death took that spark from Isaac.

Isaac feels at fault. He and Derek were always too similar. They were two people who lost everyone around them, and, in the end, Isaac’s darkness beat out Derek’s. One of them was always going to get the other killed. Isaac just didn’t expect to be the one left standing.

All Isaac can think about is the way he and Derek left things. Isaac will never know what caused Derek to snap. It will be a black spot in Isaac’s memory, haunting him forever. His last moments with Derek were left screaming and fighting, and there’s nothing he can do to change that. Isaac sighs. He has to stop thinking about it.

And yet, every time Isaac closes his eyes he sees Derek and Ennis falling over the edge. He sees Derek’s body splayed across the abandoned escalators. No movement, no heart rate, nothing. Just like that, Derek was gone. He’s gone.

Isaac shakes his head minutely as if to rid the thoughts from his skull. *Snap out of it*, he tells himself. *There’s nothing you can do.*

Isaac stares blankly out the window. The scenery passes by in a blur, but Isaac doesn't pay it any mind. Isaac unfocuses. He zones out, letting everything around him fade away. It's something Isaac has gotten quite good at over years. A lot of Isaac's life hasn't necessarily been enjoyable. Isaac has studied the art of disassociation, and he uses it to survive.

Isaac doesn't know how much time passes like that, but, eventually, he's jolted out of his daze when the bus comes to an abrupt, screeching stop. Isaac blinks repetitively, coming back to himself. Isaac glances out the window to find traffic surrounding them in both directions.

Isaac pulls his phone out, and, with a quick Google search, learns that, "There's a jackknifed tractor a few miles ahead. Could miss the meet."

Boyd doesn't respond. Isaac turns away from the window to look over at him. Boyd is leaning slightly forward in their seat, staring dead ahead. A sinking feeling settles in Isaac's stomach.

"Boyd?" Isaac asks.

Boyd's only response is a quiet snarl. Isaac can hardly see his face, but he catches the slightest glimpse of glowing yellow eyes.

"Boyd?" Isaac repeats a bit firmer, trying to snap Boyd out of it.

Boyd is breathing heavily now. He turns slowly toward the back of the bus, eyes locking onto his target: Ethan. Boyd is gripping the seat in front of them with clawed fingers, and Isaac has no idea what to do. Isaac looks around desperately, trying to find a solution. If a fight breaks out on this school bus, it's going to be a bloodbath. Isaac can't let that happen.

Fortunately, Isaac isn't the only one who notices the ticking time bomb. Scott rushes up from the back of the bus, clamping his hand over Boyd's clawed one. Boyd immediately growls, but Scott isn't deterred. Isaac watches as Scott slowly crouches down next to Boyd.

"Let. Go." Boyd snarls.

"You got a plan?" Scott asks. Boyd's gaze strays away from Scott back over to Ethan, but Scott easily maneuvers himself back into his line of sight. Scott continues, "Tell me your brilliant plan, and I'll let go."

Isaac watches as Scott single handedly keeps Boyd pinned with

nothing but his words and a hand over his.

“What are you going to do?” Scott asks. “Kill him, right here? And then what? What are you going to do after that?”

“I don’t care,” Boyd says. And then he lunges.

Isaac springs into action. He grabs Boyd’s arm, using all of his weight to keep Boyd pinned to the seat. All Isaac has to do is keep Boyd from getting past Scott. If Isaac can do that, Scott will handle the rest.

Boyd turns his snarl on him, but Isaac doesn’t let up. He mouths, “*Come on.*”

“I do,” Scott says. Boyd turns back to him, panting with the effort to escape.

It’s then that Isaac finally gets a good look at Scott. Immediately, he notices the red stain over Scott’s side. He’s trying to use his jacket to conceal it, but it’s hard to miss.

“Whoa, whoa, you’re still hurt,” Isaac says without thinking. As soon as the scent of fresh blood hits his nose, the words are tumbling out. His grip on Boyd starts to go slack as his focus splits, half of his concern going towards Scott and his well-being.

Luckily, the realization has a similar effect on Boyd. He goes still in their hold, the notion that Scott is still hurt draining the anger from his system.

“I’m fine,” Scott says, but neither Boyd nor Isaac really believe him. “Give me a chance to figure something out, something that doesn’t have to end with someone else dying.”

Boyd pauses, contemplative, then says, “Okay.”

Isaac watches as Scott slowly starts to stand. He uses the seats on either side to help push himself up, wincing as he does. Worry clouds Isaac’s mind. He can’t lose Scott too. He just can’t.

Isaac suppresses his fear, turning his focus over to Boyd. Boyd is leaning back in his seat, effectively deflated. Isaac asks, “You good?”

Boyd just nods. He’s clearly frustrated, and Isaac gets that. He’s feeling it too. With minimal effort, the alphas have halved their pack. And it hurts. It hurts like nothing Isaac has ever experienced before.

Isaac has felt grief. He lost every member of his family and each death was different, but, still, this is something else entirely.

When Isaac lost his mom, it was like it had happened to someone else. It was a distant, far away thing. He felt it, but he couldn't quite understand it. Now, thinking about it, Isaac feels sadness not for what he lost, but for what could have been.

When Isaac lost his brother, it was like having his heart ripped out of his chest. It was the worst pain he's ever felt. Isaac doesn't think anything will ever compare to that feeling. It was like all the hope and joy in Isaac's life had been snuffed out all once. Now, Isaac doesn't think about it at all. He keeps that pain locked away somewhere deep inside, somewhere it can't touch him.

When Isaac lost his dad, it was confusing, almost bittersweet. It was a complicated affair. It was freedom, but at the highest cost. It had hurt, Isaac had grieved, but he felt guilty for doing so. Now, Isaac doesn't think about his dad either. Only once a month, when the full moon is high in the sky and control is just out of reach.

This... This was nothing like any of that. Not better or worse, just different. Isaac can feel it with every breath. It's like a permanent weight has settled in his chest. Everything is a little duller now, every moment harder to live through.

Losing Erica was one thing, but losing Derek was unexpected. It was unthinkable. Derek, as flawed as he was, was the one who got Isaac out. He gave Isaac a choice and Isaac had taken it. Isaac had escaped, but, now, everything felt empty.

Isaac thunks his head against the window. He needs to stop thinking about it. Isaac stares out at the now stagnant scenery. He could easily drift away again, but he doesn't. Something is happening. With every second spent inside this bus, the tension is rising. Something is happening, and Isaac is going to be ready. He's going to help.

It's not long before Coach is barking out one of his usual melodramatic speeches, "Now, the rest of you! Don't think we're gonna miss this meet because of a slight traffic jam, a minor tornado warning, Jared. We're gonna make this thing. Nothing is gonna stop us! Stilinski, put your hand down."

That gets Isaac's attention. He turns towards the back of the bus where Stiles is saying, "You know, there's like a food exit about a half a mile up. I don't know if we stop and then maybe traffic--"

“We’re not gonna stop,” Coach says.

“Okay, but if we stop–”

“Stilinski!” Coach yells before blowing his whistle. “Shut it! Seriously! It’s a little bus! Stop asking me questions!”

Stiles slumps in his seat, like he’s giving up. Isaac doesn’t like that. Stiles never gives up that easily. There’s something bigger going on here.

Isaac focuses his hearing, looking for some insight into the situation. Through the chatter of the bus, Isaac can faintly hear Stiles’ phone call.

“Okay, look, Scott’s still hurt,” Stiles is saying. The bus is too loud and the phone too far away for Isaac to hear the other side of the conversation, but Isaac can hear the worry in Stiles’ voice. It causes his own to flare up again.

“No, he’s not healing,” Stiles says. “I think he’s actually getting worse. The blood’s turning like a black color.”

Isaac stops listening after that. He can’t hear anymore. The words ignite something in Isaac. He looks back at Scott, finding him resting his head against the window. There’s sweat pooling on his brow and his skin has drained of color.

Something is happening, and they *need* to get off the bus. Isaac wants to help, but he has no idea how. He feels helpless in the worst way.

Fortunately, it isn’t long before Stiles is resuming his efforts. “Coach, it’s five minutes for a bathroom break, okay? We’ve been on this thing for like three hours–”

Stiles’ argument gets cut short by Coach blowing his whistle.

“It’s sixty miles to the next rest stop–”

The whistle blows again.

“Being cooped for hours is not good–”

Whistle.

“You know, our bladders aren’t exactly–”

Whistle.

“Coach—”

Whistle.

“Can you—”

Whistle.

“Please—”

Whistle.

“Let me talk! I’m—” Stiles shouts, but the whistle, accompanied by Coach’s laughter, cuts him off *again*.

“Every time—”

Coach blows one long whistle, stretching out for a good ten seconds. Then he yells, “Get back to your seat, Stilinski!”

“Okay!” Stiles shouts, anger pouring off of him. *Well, there’s a limit to everyone’s patience*, Isaac thinks.

“And, Jared,” Coach says, “Keep your eyes on the horizon.”

Isaac watches as Stiles slowly looks over at Jared. There’s an idea forming and Isaac really doesn’t like where this is headed. As soon as Coach turns his back, Stiles is sliding into the seat next to Jared. *Oh no*.

It must be some kind of record because less than a minute later there’s a disgusting gagging sound followed by the stench of vomit. Coach is yelling at the driver to take the exit, and then there’s a mad dash off the bus.

In the chaos, Isaac loses sight of Stiles and Scott. Isaac turns to Boyd, “Do you see Scott?”

Boyd takes a good look around, but comes up empty, “No. I don’t see Stiles either.”

Isaac tries not to let it worry him. Stiles will have a plan. It will be okay. Scott will be okay. There’s no other option. Scott *has* to be okay.

With no distraction and worries piling up inside him, Isaac can’t stop

his thoughts from straying to last night. The memories are so fresh and vivid, it's almost like Isaac is reliving the night over and over and over again. Isaac can't stop thinking about it. He can't stop thinking about how he was almost the only one who wasn't there.

Isaac knows Scott is planning something. Scott told Isaac the others want to go after Deucalion. They want to try to kill him. Isaac knows Scott is going to do everything in his power to try to stop them. Scott is vehemently against the idea, and, surprisingly, so is Isaac. Isaac knows going after Deucalion right now is a horrible decision. And so, Isaac waits in the doorway, watching Scott get ready to leave.

When Scott turns around he gasps. All that werewolf power and still Isaac can sneak up on him.

"Where are you going?" Isaac asks, shooting for casual.

"Uh..." Scott is only a good liar when he has time to prepare. "I was gonna go get some food to eat."

"Oh, cool. I'll come with you," Isaac says, easy as anything.

"Nah, dude, it's okay. I can eat alone," Scott says. He doesn't sound very convincing.

"What are you getting?" Isaac presses. Isaac knows Scott will cave if he's persistent.

"Uhh... Mexican?" Scott says.

Isaac makes to leave the room, saying, "Dude, I love Mexican—"

"Isaac." Scott cuts him off, grabbing his arm. "I can eat alone. It's okay."

"You're not going alone," Isaac says, shaking his head with half a grin. Isaac refuses to let Scott go by himself. He won't let Scott risk his life. Not after everything he's done for Isaac. "Come on."

Scott, predictably, caves.

They ride Scott's motorcycle into an abandoned building. It's a strange spot for a meeting, but Isaac doesn't question it.

"We're just gonna talk to him, try to reason with him," Scott says as he dismounts the bike. "That's it, all right?"

Isaac admires Scott's optimism, but there's a weird feeling in the air. Isaac can't help but think that this isn't going to go as expected.

Scott must notice Isaac's hesitation because he asks, "What?"

Isaac ignores the feeling, and says, "Nothing. It's just that, uh, I'm actually kind of hungry now."

Scott laughs, and Isaac follows suit. Isaac rounds the bike, coming to stand beside Scott. Scott claps a hand down on Isaac's shoulder, and it's more reassuring than it should be.

Scott says, "So am I."

—

As soon as Stiles reappears, Isaac rushes over to him. "What's going on?"

Stiles flounders, looking past Isaac. Isaac follows Stiles' gaze to see Coach starting to round up the students. Isaac doesn't budge. He keeps Stiles' path blocked, asking, "What's wrong with Scott?"

"He's not healing," Stiles says quickly. He doesn't elaborate, he's hardly even looking at Isaac, still trying to find a way around him.

"What? Why?" Isaac asks. His voice sounds as anxious as he feels.

Stiles sighs. He seems to give up on getting out of the conversation, turning his full attention over to Isaac. "He thinks it's his fault Derek is dead, so he's not letting himself heal—"

Isaac's hearing blanks out. Anger fills his entire being. It starts in his chest and spreads from head to toe. Isaac catches sight of Ethan, and that's all it takes. Ethan is the reason Derek is dead. Him and his stupid brother and his stupid alpha pack. Isaac stomps over to the twin, grabs him by his shirt, and punches him square in the face. All Isaac can think about is how Scott was trying to save *everyone* and now he's the one that might be dying.

—

Isaac and Scott slowly approach Deucalion. He's standing halfway up one of the broken down escalators, staring down at them. He's just as intimidating as Isaac remembers him to be.

Scott glances over at Isaac, locking eyes with him. Isaac can't tell if Scott is

trying to reassure him or placate him.

"You didn't come alone," Deucalion says.

"Yeah. This is Isaac," Scott says. Isaac has a feeling Deucalion already knows that. After all, Isaac was the one who broke into the abandoned bank.

"I'm not talking about Isaac," Deucalion says. Even his voice is menacing. His tone seems to ooze superiority. It's like he knows more than them.

Turns out that isn't completely untrue. There's movement behind them, and when Isaac and Scott look back, they see Derek and Boyd coming out of the shadows. Derek is in full wolf form, eyes glowing red.

"You knew I would do this?" Scott asks, but it's barely a question. Derek's stalking forward, so Scott keeps talking. "Derek, don't. You can't do this and no one gets hurt. If someone else dies—"

"Him." Derek cuts in. "Just him."

Isaac glances between Derek and Deucalion. The tension is thick in the air now, but still, Isaac knows that Deucalion has the upper hand. They might both be alphas, but Deucalion is a killer with the strength of four alpha pack members fueling him. All Derek has is Isaac and Boyd.

"Just me?" Deucalion taunts. "Now, how's a blind man find his way into a place like this all on his own?"

There's a crumbling sound to Isaac's left. He looks over to see the alpha who pretended to be a nurse at the hospital – Kali, Isaac thinks her name is – sliding down one of the large pillars. She growls.

Then, from behind Scott and Isaac, comes Ennis. Isaac tries not to flinch as he passes by, but the man is ginormous and objectively terrifying.

The twins appear on the upper level. They're already shirtless, like at any moment they could merge together. The threat is unsettling. This is not going well in the slightest.

They're outnumbered five to four. Derek may be an alpha, but the rest of them are betas. They don't stand a chance. This is exactly what Scott was trying to avoid.

Isaac clenches his fists and braces himself for the fighting to begin.

Isaac can't stop. He's out of his mind with anger. He lands punch after punch after punch. Somebody grabs him, but Isaac keeps a tight hold on Ethan's shirt and easily brushes them off. Isaac can't see past his fury.

There's blood drooling out of Ethan's mouth, but it's not enough. They killed Erica, the girl who saved him, Derek, and now maybe Scott too.

"Isaac!" Scott's yell breaks through the anger. Isaac instantly goes still. Slowly, Isaac drops his hold on Ethan and starts to unfurl his fist. Isaac's surroundings are still fuzzy, but not Scott. Scott is clear as day.

Isaac glances down at Scott's side. There's no blood. *He's okay.* Isaac looks back up at Scott, making eye contact. Isaac can't keep the small smile from his face. Scott doesn't return it, but he doesn't look angry. He looks tired, but okay. *He's okay.*

Ignoring the stares of the crowd around him, Isaac gets back on the bus feeling lighter than he has all day.

Motel California

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 6

Word count: 2,331

Warning: canon child abuse

The sun has set by the time they pull up at the motel. Isaac notices some of his classmates making displeased faces, but it wasn't too long ago that Isaac was sleeping on Derek's – *don't think about Derek*.

Coach blows his whistle and announces, "Listen up! The meet's been pushed till tomorrow. This is the closest motel with the most vacancies and least amount of good judgment when it comes to accepting a bunch of degenerates like yourself. You'll be pairing up, choose wisely."

Isaac immediately looks over at Boyd. Boyd gives a small nod and grabs them a room key. Isaac follows him, easily tuning out Coach's rant about sexual perversions.

When they get to their room, Isaac chooses the bed closest to the windows. He sets his bag down and flops back onto the mattress. It's not as comfortable as the guest bed at the McCall's house, but it is on par with the couch at – *don't think about Derek*.

"I'm gonna go to the vending machine, want anything?" Boyd asks.

"Nah, I'm good," Isaac says.

Boyd nods and exits the room, leaving Isaac alone with nothing but his thoughts. With everything that has happened in the last few days, it's not exactly a welcome occurrence. It hasn't even been a full twenty-four hours since – *don't think about Derek*.

Isaac elects to try the television, hoping to find something good enough to keep himself distracted.

Isaac is met with nothing but static. The white noise does something to Isaac's mind, numbing out the edges. The hard lines blur and things start to go fuzzy. Isaac mindlessly presses the channel button.

198. Static. 199. Static. 200. Static. 201. Static.

Time slips away from Isaac. He doesn't remember turning the TV off, but he must have. The soft sound of static has disappeared and he's laying flat on the motel bed. He's staring at the cracked motel ceiling, following the lines with his eyes. Suddenly, a far off clanging jogs Isaac's awareness.

"Boyd?" Isaac questions. Distantly, Isaac remembers Boyd leaving the room. He knows Boyd shouldn't have been gone this long, but the thought evades Isaac's grasp before he can act on it.

The metal banging sounds again. It's getting louder, more distinct. Isaac watches the ceiling fan go round and round. More clanging. This time it's a clatter, like something falling to the floor.

Isaac sits up. He searches the room for the source of the noise, but there's nothing. The sound is real, Isaac knows, but it sounds so far away. It sounds like it's coming from everywhere.

"Hand me the 7/16 wrench."

Isaac would recognize that voice anywhere. It's his father.

Sigh. "What the hell? This is the 9/16, you moron."

The words are familiar, but Isaac can't rationalize it. Not through all his fear. It's settled in his lungs and his joints, a more powerful paralytic agent than kanima venom. Isaac is frozen. His eyes are wet. His head shakes.

"Do you know what the difference between a seven and a nine is, dumbass?"

Isaac doesn't register making the decision to speak, but it's his voice saying, "You know what the difference between a seven and a nine is? It's a stripped bolt."

"A stripped bolt."

His dad's voice echoes all around Isaac. He can't escape it.

"I'm sorry, I didn't—" Isaac is sweating, but he feels cold all over. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to shut up!"

"I want you to shut up. Shut up. Shut up. What can I do? I can't fix this now." Isaac's gaze turns left and right and back again. "I can't fix this now." Isaac's voice comes out cold and mean, but it quickly turns desperate. "I can't fix it. I can't fix it."

"I can't even keep it closed."

Realization is starting to creep into the corners of Isaac's mind, but it isn't coming quick enough. The memory is there, but it's hazy. Isaac should know what's about to happen, it's on the tip of his tongue, but the words aren't there.

"Grab the chains."

"What?" Isaac's head turns of its own volition. "Grab the chains, get in. I said, get in."

"Are you not hearing me, son? Get in the damn freezer!"

There it is. Isaac remembers now, but it's too late. It's too late. It's too late. It's too—

"Get in!"

Isaac leaps backward onto the bed. He slams the pillow over his ears, trying to block the sound out. He just has to keep the voice away. If the voice can't reach him, then he's safe. He's safe. He's safe. He's—

Everything goes quiet. There's a chorus of whispers. The voices are so quiet that Isaac can't make out what they are saying. Slowly and curiously, Isaac turns over, removing the pillow from his ears. As soon as he does, Isaac discovers his mistake.

Isaac screams as loud as he can.

The freezer door slams shut. Isaac's voice is silenced. He's trapped.

At first, Isaac pounds and claws at the freezer door with all his might. He hopes that his werewolf strength will be enough to break through, but to no avail. The door rattles against the chains, but it won't give.

Isaac screams and shouts and cries. Maybe this time someone will hear him. Maybe this time someone will intervene. Maybe this time—

Isaac goes limp. He makes himself as small as possible, trying not to

touch the walls that surround him. It's all he can do. All Isaac can do is wait.

So that's what he does. He curls up small and lets awareness slip from his mind.

—

When the freezer door opens, it's not his dad peering down at him. There's no mean sneer or muttered words of insult. It's not his dad, but Isaac doesn't recognize the face staring back at him.

"Hey, Isaac," the person knows him. Isaac squirms backwards, but there's nowhere to go. "Got something for you, buddy."

A flame is thrust into Isaac's face, close enough that he can feel the heat of it. It tickles at the tip of his nose, warming his cheeks. Isaac growls. His eyes burn gold, his fangs slide into place, and hair bursts from his cheeks.

All at once, the freezer falls away, revealing the floor of the motel and the very scratched underside of the bed. Isaac almost tips the entire thing over trying to get out from under it.

By the time Isaac gets free, the person, who Isaac now realizes was Stiles, is gone. Isaac isn't alone in the room though. Boyd is standing in the doorway to the bathroom. His claws and fangs are bared, but it doesn't appear to be an act of aggression. He looks scared. He looks lost.

Isaac is shivering. His skin is damp with sweat and his face with tears. Isaac leans back against the skewed bed and pulls his knees up to his chest, hugging them close.

"Wh—" Isaac starts, but immediately cuts himself off. His voice is hoarse, and when he tries to speak, it feels like someone's claws are scraping down the inside of throat. Probably from all the screaming. The quiet, sensible part of Isaac's brain tells him that werewolf healing will take care of that in no time.

Boyd seems to be frozen in shock. He's dripping wet, water droplets rolling down his chest. He's getting the carpet soaked. It shouldn't matter, but, for some reason, Isaac is bothered by it. Each bead of water that hits the floor stirs something in Isaac. It's enough to get him on his feet.

Isaac maneuvers past Boyd and into the trashed bathroom. Isaac ignores everything that he sees. He refuses to process the implications of the disaster, and, instead, he grabs a towel. Without looking at him, Isaac hands it to Boyd.

Isaac grabs his bag from the floor, rifling through it until he finds a clean, dry sweatshirt. Isaac trades in his sweaty t-shirt, replacing it with the soft, warm cotton. He lets it soothe him. That's about as much as Isaac can function before exhaustion starts tugging on his limbs. Isaac crumples down onto the floor again. This time, he gives the bed and the television a wide berth.

Isaac doesn't know how long they wait before Stiles and Lydia return. When they do, they both look a mess.

"Come on," Stiles says, leading the charge. "We're sleeping on the bus."

"Why?" Isaac asks, voice still scratchy.

"Doesn't matter," Stiles says, which seems ridiculously unfair.

"What the hell happened to us?" Boyd says, finally breaking his silence.

"It's the motel," Lydia says, "It's messing with your heads. We need to leave."

Her matter-of-fact manner of speaking is much better than Stiles' way of speaking in riddles and codes. She gives Isaac just enough information that he's willing to obey the directions. Besides, he wants out of this room. Isaac pulls his sneakers on and makes for the exit. He doesn't wait to see if the other three are following him. He just goes. He knows where the bus is. And he doesn't want to be asked any questions.

Isaac can still hear his father's voice rattling around in his skull. It felt so real. He's not totally convinced that it wasn't.

Isaac walks onto the bus to find Scott and Allison already there, both enshrined in restless energy. Isaac looks between the two of them. Allison is fully dry, but Scott's hair is wet and a little fluffy. (*Why is everyone wet?*) Unsure, Isaac stands at the front of the bus. He doesn't want to interrupt something, but, also, he would really like to sit down.

“Isaac,” Allison says, gentle as ever. “Are you okay?”

Isaac just nods. Scott is looking at him. It’s one of those x-ray stares of his, like he can see right through Isaac. Isaac ignores him. For once, he’s too tired to care what Scott sees within him. Instead, Isaac walks down the aisle, bypassing the pair. Isaac thinks one of them might have reached out to try to stop him, but Isaac just keeps going, paying them no mind.

Isaac collapses in the back most seat, falling asleep before the others even join them.

“—don’t wanna know. But in case you missed the announcement, the meet’s canceled, so we’re heading home. Pack it in!”

Isaac is woken up by the sound of Coach’s voice booming through the limited space. Isaac quickly sits up in his seat, looking around. The sun has risen and there’s a small crowd of students milling around outside. There’s a crick in Isaac’s neck and his throat still feels sore, but they made it through the night. He’s safe.

Once the initial grogginess fades, Isaac turns his attention towards the front half of the bus. There, he watches as Ethan slides into Scott’s seat. The twin is trying to be casual, but his movements are stilted. Isaac tries to listen in on the conversation, but his fatigue is impairing his abilities. He’s too exhausted to properly sharpen his hearing.

Ethan doesn’t stay long. As soon as he’s gone, Isaac makes his way up the bus, falling into the seat behind Scott and Stiles.

“What did Ethan say?” Isaac asks bluntly. If he wasn’t so tired, he might be less forthright about it.

“Derek’s alive,” Scott says, voice betraying how shocked he is.

The words hit Isaac like a train. Without pause, he feels relief, then shock, then anger. The feelings won’t stop. They just keep coming. One after another, relentless.

Isaac thinks he might cry, but swallows the lump in his throat. His voice sounds worn out and weak, “What?”

“They’re pretty sure Derek is alive,” Scott repeats. “But he killed Ennis, so Kali is... She’ll be coming after him.”

Isaac can't believe what he's hearing. *Derek's alive*. Isaac doesn't know what to think. He doesn't know what to feel. He doesn't know what to say. Isaac opens his mouth to say something, anything, but then a muted whistle catches his attention.

The whole group turns, watching with bated breath as Lydia cups her hand over Coach's whistle. When she pulls it away, her palm is coated in a fine, purple powder.

"Wolfsbane," Lydia says.

Stiles says, "So every time Coach blew the whistle on the bus, Scott, Isaac, Boyd—"

"And Ethan," Lydia amends.

"We all inhaled it," Scott says.

"You were all poisoned by it," Allison adds.

Isaac looks between the four of them. As an outsider, he witnesses the exact moment they all simultaneously experience the same epiphany, finishing each other's sentences and everything. Instantly, Isaac feels out of place. It's not a new feeling by any means, but that doesn't make it any less unpleasant.

"So that's how the darach got in your heads," Stiles says. Before the attempted attack on Deucalion, Scott had explained to Isaac what the darach was, but Isaac hadn't realized that's what was at play last night. They were almost sacrifices. "That's how he did it."

Stiles grabs the whistle from Lydia, scrambling to throw it out the window.

"Stilinski!" Coach yells in protest, but the bus is already pulling away from the motel.

Isaac glances at the four around him. Still feeling like an intruder, Isaac says, "I should check on Boyd."

It's a strange feeling, being torn between two groups. Isaac is living with Scott now, but only as a necessity, only because he has nowhere else to go. Isaac is still a part of Derek's pack, but only because it's a benefit to the alpha, only because it gives him power. It's a technicality, more than anything.

Isaac isn't torn between the two groups, rather he's lingering in between them. He doesn't fully fit with either, and neither fully want him. He doesn't belong anywhere, not really. He never has. It's a harsh reality, but it's Isaac's.

In the end, Isaac doesn't check on Boyd. He just falls back asleep.

Currents

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 7

Word count: 4,903

Warning: canon character death

Scott returns from bringing his mom dinner at the hospital much later than Isaac expected. Scott pauses in the doorway of the guest bedroom (Isaac still isn't comfortable being in the main rooms when he's home alone). There's a grave expression on his face.

"What happened?" Isaac asks, sitting up.

"There's one doctor dead and another missing," Scott says. "It's healers."

It takes a moment for the pieces to click together, but as soon as they do, Isaac says, "We can protect your mom."

Scott's eyebrows raise, like he's shocked. Then, "It's not just that. Ethan and Danny were there. Danny – Danny almost died. He threw up mistletoe."

Isaac's face twists in confusion. They know by now that the darach is willing to branch out past the three fold death, but Danny isn't a healer. "What's the pattern?"

"I don't know yet," Scott says with a sigh. "Stiles is gonna try to figure it out. He's much better at that stuff than I am."

"Don't tell him that. He's already insufferable," Isaac says in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Scott cracks a smile. "You'll help me protect my mom?"

"Yeah, yeah, of course." Isaac says. He leaves off the *it's the least I can do*.

"What about Derek?" Scott asks. He's leaning against the doorway now. His voice is casual, but there's a weight to his words.

“Boyd is keeping an eye on things, but we don’t know when Kali is coming,” Isaac says. He leaves off the *Derek probably doesn’t want to see me*.

Scott looks like he wants to press the subject further, but he doesn’t. Instead, Scott says, “We can take shifts watching over my mom tonight.”

—

“Boys!”

Isaac wakes with a start. He springs up off the ground before his mind even has a chance to process. Instinctively, his hands form fists at his sides.

Melissa McCall is sitting up in bed, looking at them with a deadpan, unimpressed expression. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Uh... We were watching over you,” Isaac says, looking between Melissa and Scott.

“We wanted to make sure you weren’t the third sacrifice,” Scott explains.

“But both of you were asleep,” Melissa says. Her eyebrows furrow in confusion. It’s such a Scott-like expression. Isaac has to look away. He glances down, but instantly regrets it as a muscle in his neck pulls uncomfortably. *That’s what he gets for falling asleep on the floor*, Isaac thinks, reaching up to rub at his neck.

There’s a pause, and then Scott says, “You were on watch last.”

Isaac’s hand freezes on the back of his neck. He looks up at Scott, “What are you talking about? You were on watch last.”

“No,” Scott says simply, “you were on watch last.”

Isaac drops his hands down to his hips. A blurry memory starts to resurface and... *Yeah*. He admits, sheepish, “I might’ve been on watch last.”

Melissa huffs a small laugh, “My heroes.”

Isaac tries to ignore his surprise at her lack of anger. Isaac should know by now that Melissa, while strong and intimidating, is kind more than anything.

“Wait, didn’t you say that they were all doctors? I mean, I haven’t had an M.D. recently attached to my name, so I think I’m in the clear,” Melissa says. It’s a logical argument, but there’s nothing logical about the threat to a parent’s life.

“Yeah, but it could just come under any kind of healer, Mom, and you were definitely a healer last night,” Scott says, stepping closer to the bed.

Isaac feels like he’s intruding. It’s becoming a more and more familiar feeling these days. Isaac avoids looking directly at the pair, and, instead, starts to clean up the mess they left on Melissa’s dresser.

“Yeah, well, I’m not going to be anyone’s human sacrifice today, so both of you get your butts to school,” Melissa says, not leaving any room for debate.

Isaac sweeps the remaining crumbs back into the bowl and piles the three soda cans inside. It’s a bit of a precarious fit, especially since one of the sodas is only half empty. Scott reaches over and grabs the half full can from the bowl. Right before leaving the room, he turns back to his mom and adds, “Just promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I’m always careful, Scott,” she says. Though the words themselves might be dismissive, her tone isn’t. It’s gentle and reassuring.

Isaac ducks out of the room before that voice can be used against him.

—

Boyd catches Isaac in the hallway before he even gets to his first class. He grabs Isaac by the forearm and says, “It’s tonight.”

Isaac stops walking, but pulls his arm free. “What?”

“Kali is coming tonight,” Boyd says. His eyes are frantic in a way that Isaac has only ever seen on the full moons.

“How do you know?” Isaac asks.

“I went to see Derek. I wanted to confirm for myself that he really was alive and... the alpha pack’s symbol was painted on the window,” Boyd explains.

Isaac pauses. He didn’t even consider going to check on Derek. The thought never even crossed his mind. Isaac doesn’t know whether he

should feel guilty or not. Derek treated Isaac horribly. He broke bones as punishment, he kicked Isaac out, he mirrored his father's actions. But... Isaac always thought that underneath it all, deep down, Derek really did care about him.

Isaac might not know where he stands with Derek, but he does know that he doesn't want him to die.

"Okay, so, what do we do?" Isaac asks.

The mania in Boyd's eyes dims with Isaac's agreement. It solidifies Isaac in his decision. It also reminds him that, similarly to himself, Boyd doesn't have many people in his life that he can trust or depend on.

"I have a plan, but I need to steal some supplies," Boyd says. Then, "I know this is going to sound silly, but can you get us excused from school? There's a lot of attention on me right now—"

"I got it, Boyd," Isaac interjects. "I'll meet you at the bus stop?"

Boyd nods. He doesn't thank Isaac, but Isaac doesn't want him to.

—

During the bus ride to Derek's loft, Boyd shares his plan with Isaac. It sounds like it might actually work. Isaac hopes it does. They could use a win.

It's not long before the pair are taking the elevator up to Derek's loft. Isaac hasn't seen Derek properly since the night he kicked him out. Sure, they saw each other in passing during the attack on Deucalion, but that wasn't much of a reunion. Isaac won't admit it, but he's nervous. He doesn't know how Derek is going to react to seeing him.

Isaac swallows his nerves as they approach the door. Boyd opens it with a metallic clang. They walk in slowly, almost as if they're testing the waters.

"Go back to school," Derek says from where he sits, perching on the spiral staircase.

"Well, actually, we can't," Isaac says. "Boyd and I are incredibly and unbelievably sick."

"With what, brain damage?" Derek's words come out cold, but that

isn't new, and it certainly doesn't give Isaac any insight into his true feelings. Derek's voice is always cold, especially when he's refusing help.

"Well, I have a migraine, and, uh, Boyd here has explosive diarrhea," Isaac says, leaning back against the metal table. He picks up one of the old books, playing with it to occupy his slightly shaking hands. He's masking his anxiety with uncharacteristic confidence and bad humor. It's a little bit pathetic.

"We're here to protect you," Boyd says. Boyd never talks in circles, and he always says exactly what he means. It's one of the things Isaac likes most about Boyd.

"You're here to protect me?" Derek questions as he makes his way down the stairs. "Well, I'm in trouble then."

"Actually, Boyd here came up with a plan," Isaac says, flipping through the book like he's actually interested in it.

"Yeah, I thought about the time Gerard had me and Erica locked up, tied up with electrical wires pushing current through us. I was wondering how we could do something like that..." Boyd leans down, unzips his bag, and pulls out a thick coil of wires. "But on a bigger scale."

Derek, for all his stoicism, actually looks impressed. "That might actually work."

And so they get to work.

Luckily, Derek has a hose that they can use to fill the loft with water. Boyd explains, "In a pool of electrified water, it can take up to 50 milliamps to kill a normal human, less than the power it takes to turn on a light bulb."

"That's comforting," Derek says, looking between Boyd and Isaac. Isaac pointedly gives him no reaction.

"If we disable the circuit interrupter in the building's electrical room, the current will keep coming, and anyone who steps foot in here... they'll get a pretty shocking surprise," Boyd says.

Most of what he says goes right over Isaac's head, but there is one important detail he can add. "Especially someone who's barefoot."

Boyd drops the hose to the ground, and then they wait.

Isaac takes the opportunity to text Scott. He tells him that Kali is coming tonight, explains Boyd's plan, and assures him he should keep his focus on preventing the next sacrifice.

Not a minute later, Scott replies: **We were wrong it's not my mom. It's Deaton. He's been taken.**

Isaac can barely contain his shock. "Deaton's been taken."

Derek clarifies, "As in...?"

"He's the next sacrifice," Isaac says, still looking down at his phone in surprise. "I always thought Deaton was untouchable."

"Does Scott need help?" Boyd asks. He's looking between Derek and Isaac. For a moment, Isaac wonders how much Boyd knows about the tension between Derek and Isaac. He wonders if Derek said anything about the change in Isaac's living situation. Isaac hadn't said a word about it to Boyd. He wonders if maybe he should have.

Isaac texts Scott back: **Do you need help?**

Scott replies: **Stay and help Derek.**

It's not explicitly a no. Derek and Scott are alike in that way, neither will ask for help even when they need it. Isaac could press for details, he could protest, but he doesn't. He decides to take Scott's words at face value. Derek is going to need all the help he can get tonight, and if Scott so much as hints that he's in trouble, Isaac won't be able to stay.

"No, he's got it covered, I think," Isaac says.

Derek and Boyd say nothing. Isaac pockets his phone. They keep waiting.

—

It takes a couple hours, but, eventually, the water levels out. It gradually rises one, two, three inches. They wait until there's about six inches of water filling the loft, then Boyd turns the hose off. The waterline comes up just below their raised platforms, keeping the three of them out of its reach.

With the electrical wires already plugged in, all Boyd has to do to

finish setting their trap is flip the power back on. Then, he gently tosses the wires into the pool of water. They hit the surface with a buzz of electricity.

It looks more powerful than Isaac expected. He asks, “Is this gonna kill them?”

“I hope so,” Boyd says. In that moment, Isaac realizes that, for Boyd, this might be about more than saving Derek. This might be about avenging Erica. It makes Isaac worry. Acts of revenge never go to plan, especially not in Beacon Hills, but it’s too late to change course now.

—

Slowly but surely, the sun starts to set.

As darkness falls around them, Isaac notices it. Isaac spent many, many nights in this loft, and the glowing light of the alarm had been difficult to get used to at first. At night, it’s glaringly bright and paints the whole room red. It’s hard to miss.

Well, it’s missing now.

Isaac points at the dimmed alarm, “Isn’t the light on that supposed to be on?”

“Yeah,” Derek says, voice ominous.

“What does it mean if it’s not?” Isaac asks, though he thinks he already knows the answer.

“Someone cut the auxiliary power,” Derek says.

“What about the main—” Suddenly, the room goes pitch black, cutting Boyd off. The loft is filled with the crackling sound of the generator powering down. Isaac jumps to his feet.

Slowly, Derek approaches Isaac’s side, stopping at the edge of the platform. Isaac watches, frozen, as Derek takes the first step into the water. Nothing. Isaac is both relieved that Derek didn’t get electrocuted, and terrified that their plan is falling apart around them.

“Derek...” Isaac says, watching him closely. Water sloshes with each step he takes, but he remains unharmed. Derek pauses in the middle

of the loft, illuminated by the glow of the moonlight through the window. “What do we do now?”

Derek’s eyes burn red. “We fight.”

They don’t have time to contemplate how the alphas knew their strategy, all they can do now is try to regroup as quickly as possible. Isaac steps off the platform, grimacing as the water instantly seeps into his shoes. Isaac and Boyd quickly cross the room, taking rank behind Derek. Isaac rolls up his sleeves and prepares for battle.

The sound of metal against metal fills the loft. The door screeches as it’s pried open, revealing Kali, clawed feet and all.

“I gotta be honest, Derek,” she says, stepping into the loft. “When Ennis died, I thought to myself, I’d just go for it. Find you and kill you, wherever you stood.” Kali keeps walking closer and closer, but the three of them stand their ground. “Then I remembered how you surround yourself with these teenagers, hiding behind them,” Kali croons. “And I thought, ‘What’s a girl gotta do to get you alone?’”

Kali looks behind her. Of all the things Isaac expected to see, the twins holding Ms. Blake hostage was not one of them. Derek’s shoulders drop. A sense of doom falls over Isaac.

Kali’s expression is smug when she turns her attention back to Derek. “You and me, Derek, or they tear her apart. What do you say? You think you can beat me one-on-one?”

Derek jerks his head, gesturing for Boyd and Isaac to fall back. It’s a horrible idea. Derek is going to get himself killed.

Isaac doesn’t know what the dynamic is between Derek and Ms. Blake, didn’t even know they knew each other, if he’s honest. However, if Derek is willing to risk his life for her, then it must be romantic in nature. Isaac can’t imagine Derek having romantic feelings for anyone, but what else would cause Derek to set aside his usual selfish nature? Really, Isaac can’t imagine Derek having *any* sort of feelings for anyone. Derek seems to operate in a constant state of disinterest.

Well, he’s interested now.

“I’m gonna rip your throat out,” Derek snarls. “With my teeth.”

With Kali’s full attention on Derek and the twins focused on containing Ms. Blake, Isaac takes the opportunity to slip his phone out

of his pocket. It's a calculated risk. If the alphas catch Isaac, their aggression will be turned onto him. But if Isaac doesn't do this, then Derek is going to die. So, Isaac goes for it.

Isaac slowly shifts to stand behind Boyd, using his stature to hide the light of his phone. As quickly as possible, Isaac sends a text to Scott: **The plan didn't work. They cut the power.** The underlying message of *we're screwed please come save us* goes untyped.

Derek isn't pulling any punches, but Kali is faster than him. She maneuvers out of the way of his claws over and over, leaving Derek stumbling. While the water is hindering Derek's ability to fight, Kali is unperturbed. She swings a foot at Derek, forcing him to jump. When he lands, Kali is ready. She swipes her claws across Derek's side.

"Derek!" Ms. Blake screams. Her voice is high and desperate, the word almost getting lost in the emotion.

Kali climbs up one of the columns. Derek runs at her, but she throws her foot out. It collides with Derek's face. Derek lets out a bellowing roar, one that makes Isaac wince.

Isaac is itching to join the fight. Not because he wants to get his ass kicked, but because he doesn't want to watch Derek die. Again.

Isaac keeps glancing between his phone and the brawl, impatiently waiting for a response from Scott. When a text finally comes through, it's from Stiles: **On our way. We're gonna turn the power back on. I'll text right before.**

Isaac looks out over the room, trying to come up with a plan of action. Getting Ms. Blake to safety has to be the number one priority. Isaac judges the distance between his platform and the loft entrance. Stiles can't give Isaac more than a couple seconds head start, so it's going to be close. He's going to have to be fast. Luckily, speed is Isaac's specialty. He just hopes the shock of the power coming back on is enough for the twins to release their hold on the teacher.

Isaac quickly assesses the fight. Kali has moved on top of the table, readying herself to pounce on Derek. Ms. Blake is doing a good job making the twins' lives difficult, screaming and squirming and crying. The alphas all seem sufficiently distracted, so Isaac takes the chance, and nudges Boyd's shoulder.

Isaac can't warn Derek. He's too far away, and there's no way the alphas wouldn't notice. Isaac can only pray that the voltage isn't high

enough to kill him. Derek's fate might be out of Isaac's hands, but he can warn Boyd. Isaac raises his phone up for him to read, and then mouths, *"Run when I run."*

Boyd nods, indicating that the message has been received.

Isaac keeps his phone in his hand, but pulls his eyes away from the screen. He slowly moves out from behind Boyd, trying to get a clear shot at the entryway. Isaac moves as close to the edge of the platform as he can without touching the water.

At that same moment, Ms. Blake screams at the top of her lungs. She sounds hurt. Isaac isn't thinking, he almost throws the entire plan away to rescue her. Derek spots his movement, shouting, "No!"

Isaac stutters to stop. He turns to see Boyd advancing behind him and yells, "Wait!"

Boyd goes still. He's too far away from the loft entrance, but they can't risk the twins hurting Ms. Blake. He can't move. Not yet. They have to wait for Stiles.

Isaac tries to keep his eyes upward, so he's looking at the fight, but focusing on his phone. It's hard to tune everything out – the water splashing, the werewolves growling, the screams of Ms. Blake – but Isaac only has one chance. His window of opportunity is going to be small. He can't miss the signal. He can't mess this up.

The battle is getting more and more vicious. Kali flips through the air, knocking Derek onto his back into the water. Isaac mentally pleads with Derek to get up. He has to keep fighting, just a little while longer. They're so close, they have to be.

Kali pulls Derek up out of the water and, for a moment, Isaac is convinced they're too late. He's certain Derek is about to die, but then his phone buzzes. It's a text from Stiles: **NOW**

Isaac doesn't think, he just runs. He sprints through the water as fast as he can. The twins drop Ms. Blake, rushing towards him, but Isaac darts between them. He can hear the sound of electricity crackling behind him, but he doesn't stop.

Isaac grabs Ms. Blake, pulling her down to the ground. Isaac holds the teacher close to him, practically wrapping his body around her. He has to keep her safe. If Derek was willing to die for her, then he has to keep her safe.

Isaac can't tear his eyes away as the electricity rips through the three werewolves in the water. Boyd didn't make it out. He doesn't stand a chance against the currents. He loses his footing and falls heavily to the ground. Water splashes up around him. His body convulses weakly.

Kali and Derek struggle against each other, both of them losing their balance. Kali tries to keep her grip on Derek, but his weight and gravity win out. They crash to their knees as separate units. Derek falls forward into the water.

Isaac tries to use his body to shield Ms. Blake from the ghastly scene, but all he can really do is hold her close as they look on in horror.

"Take him!" Kali snarks at the twins.

The twins run into the now safe water, grabbing hold of Derek. The twins force Derek's clawed hands out in front of him. Derek, despite his weakened state, doesn't give in. He keeps struggling hard against them, but he's no match for the twins. Not like this.

Isaac is helpless to do anything but watch as Kali drags Boyd's limp body out of the water. She hoists Boyd's body into the air, and drops him hard onto Derek's claws. The sound of Derek's claws impaling Boyd's flesh makes Isaac sick to his stomach.

Isaac winces. He holds Ms. Blake impossibly tighter. There seems to be a moment where time goes still. Everything hangs in the balance. The tension rises higher and higher.

And then Boyd groans. The tension releases. Isaac's hold on Ms. Blake goes slack. Isaac watches as Boyd whimpers and falls to the ground.

"I'm giving you till the next full moon, Derek. Make the smart choice. Join the pack..." Kali says, walking away. She spares Derek one last glance. "Or next time I'm killing all of you."

The alphas exit, leaving only destruction in their wake. Isaac can't move as he watches Derek struggle to get Boyd off his claws.

"No, no," Derek murmurs, holding his hands over Boyd's wounds. Isaac can see the blood from here. He doesn't want to see it.

Isaac can't move.

"It's okay," Boyd's voice is so soft Isaac almost can't hear it. He doesn't

want to hear it.

Isaac can't move.

"No, no, no, it's not," Derek whispers. There's emotion in his voice that Isaac has never heard before. He doesn't want to hear it.

Isaac can't move.

"It's all okay, Derek," Boyd says. It's not okay. Isaac doesn't want to hear it. He doesn't want to hear any of this, but he can't move.

Isaac can't move.

"I'm – I'm sorry," Derek says. It's the most sincere Isaac has ever heard Derek. He doesn't want to hear it.

Isaac can't move.

"The full moon," Boyd's voice is faint, like every word is a struggle. "That feeling..." Derek finally looks up from his hands, making eye contact with Boyd. Isaac will never look into those eyes again. "That was worth it."

Isaac wants to scream that it wasn't. It wasn't worth it. Isaac can't move.

"Did you know there's a lunar eclipse? I always wondered what..." Boyd winces. "What that felt like for one of us." Boyd's voice grows weaker and weaker. "For a werewolf..." Boyd gasps, and with one last breath, says, "I hope it'll make us stronger."

And then Boyd's body finally gives out. He falls out of Derek's arms and into the water. The splash is obscene. Isaac feels a droplet touch his skin. He doesn't want to feel it. He doesn't want to see it. He doesn't want to believe it.

Isaac can't move. He can't breathe. Derek's whole body is shaking, and Isaac realizes that he's crying. Isaac should go to him, but he can't move. He can't move. He can't breathe.

Suddenly, Stiles runs into the room. He comes to a halt in the entryway, taking in the sight before him. Lydia runs up behind him. Immediately, she falters. Her shock forces her back a step.

Isaac can feel Stiles' eyes on him. He should meet his gaze, but he can't. He can't pull his eyes away from Boyd. He can't look away. He

doesn't want to.

Isaac should do something, but he can't. He can't move. He doesn't want to.

Stiles is propelled into action. He rushes into the water, coming to a stop next to Derek. Stiles is looking between Derek's blood stained hands and Boyd's body. Stiles doesn't say anything, just rests a hand on Derek's shoulder.

Boyd's body is laying there in a pool of water and his own blood. His body is just laying there. It's laying there, and Isaac wants to run to him. He wants to hold him. He wants to bring him back to life. He wants to scream. He wants to cry.

He wants to, but he can't. He can't move. Isaac can't move. He's frozen.

—

Everything goes hazy after that. Isaac has no idea how long he sits there, limbs numb, staring at the lifeless body of one of the only people he's ever considered a friend. The lifeless body of Boyd.

Boyd is dead.

It might be hours before Isaac finally moves again. He doesn't do it on his own. (He can't.) There are hands under his arms, pulling him to his feet. The person blocks Isaac's view of Boyd's body. Isaac thinks he's struggling against them now, but he's just not ready. He's not ready to look away. He's not ready to get up. He's not ready.

"Isaac." The voice is soft and familiar. It draws Isaac out of his daze. It's Scott.

It isn't the first time Scott's voice has had this effect on Isaac. Scott has done this before. He's used his voice to bring Isaac back to himself, back to reality. Scott has done this before, but never like this. Before, Scott was yelling. Now, his voice is gentle and hushed.

Isaac's eyes come back into focus. He starts to regain control of his arms and legs. He can wiggle his fingers and toes. He can move.

Scott is holding Isaac up, looking at him with those caring eyes. They're too much, too powerful, too alive. "Isaac?"

Isaac can't speak, not yet, so he just nods. Scott nods back at him.

Standing there, using Scott as a crutch, Isaac feels unsteady in every way. He still feels fuzzy around the edges. He doesn't want the feeling to go away. It keeps the pain at bay.

Eventually, he works up the courage to look around the room. Derek and Ms. Blake are gone. Isaac doesn't remember letting go of the teacher, but obviously he must have. Stiles and Lydia are waiting off to the side. They aren't speaking, just standing there and pretending not to notice Isaac.

Isaac doesn't dare look at where Boyd's body is. Or was.

Isaac meets Scott's eyes. Slowly, Scott removes his hands from Isaac's ribs. Nothing happens. Isaac doesn't collapse. The world doesn't stop spinning.

Isaac flexes his fingers and toes. He can move.

—

Scott takes Isaac home. Isaac stays present enough to maintain control of his body, but he lets his mind drift away. Staying focused hurts too much.

Isaac knows Scott is worried. He knows Scott wants to talk about it, but Isaac doesn't. Isaac doesn't want to know what happened to the body. He doesn't want to know what the cover story is. He doesn't want to know.

The only thing Isaac really wants to know is where Derek went.

Isaac doesn't ask until they're inside the house. Scott leads Isaac up to the guest bedroom, and there, standing in the doorway, Isaac asks, "Where did Derek go?"

Scott looks surprised by the question. Maybe he didn't expect Isaac to come out of his catatonic state so soon. Or maybe he didn't expect Isaac to care about Derek.

"I – uh, I don't know. He took off before I got there. Stiles said Ms. Blake went after him," Scott says.

It's not a very good answer. Isaac doesn't know what to say. *I think Derek's not okay*, but, of course, he isn't. None of this is okay. Isaac

isn't okay. It's not okay.

Isaac is jolted out of his thoughts by the feeling of Scott's strong arms wrapping around him. Isaac makes a soft noise like a gasp, and then he just melts.

"I'm sorry," Scott whispers. Isaac wants to hear it.

Isaac feels his eyes go wet, and he wants to cry, but the tears won't fall. He just teeters on the precipice.

Then, time goes funny again. Isaac doesn't know how long Scott hugs him. It seems like Scott is waiting for Isaac to be the one to pull away. Except Isaac doesn't want to. He doesn't want to pull away. He doesn't want to let go. He wants to hug Scott forever.

But he doesn't. Isaac breaks the hold, wiping his not quite wet and not quite dry eyes. Isaac turns his back on Scott. He can't look at him, can't bear to see how alive he is.

Scott takes that as the cue it is, and says, "Goodnight, Isaac."

Isaac climbs in bed, and begs sleep to take him. It doesn't.

Isaac doesn't cry. He doesn't sleep. He doesn't move.

Visionary

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 8

Word count: 4,818

The next twenty-four pass in a blur. Isaac never cries, but he does manage to sleep. And that's how he spends most of the following day. Isaac sleeps and sleeps and sleeps.

Until Scott informs him that Derek is still missing. Then Isaac is wide awake.

Isaac sits bolt upright in bed. "What?"

Scott stands in the doorway, looking sympathetic. "Derek is still missing. Have – Have you heard from him?"

There's a frantic feeling building in Isaac's lungs. Isaac has mixed feelings about Derek's disappearance. On one hand, Isaac is desperate to see Derek again, alive and well. On the other hand, Isaac is terrified to see him again, unsure of how either of them will react. Isaac's concern wins out.

"No, no, we—" Isaac shakes his head. "The full moon was the first time I've seen him since," Isaac gestures around the room, hoping that Scott understands.

Scott frowns, "Oh."

"Oh?" Isaac questions.

"Stiles and I were kind of hoping you'd have the magic answer," Scott says. He looks a bit sheepish about it. Isaac cracks a smile.

"Well, I have one answer, but you're not going to like it," Isaac says.

It takes a moment for Scott to catch on, but then he's pleading, "Oh no. Isaac, no."

Isaac shrugs, "He knows Derek better than we do."

"I don't like him," Scott says. There's a whine to Scott's voice that

Isaac isn't used to hearing. He sounds his age for once.

Isaac replies, the hint of a smirk on his lips, "Nobody likes him."

Stiles comes over to the McCall house an hour later. He's here to pick up Isaac, but first, he levels Scott with an exasperated look. "Are we sure about this? We're going to trust Gerard *and* Peter?"

Scott sighs, "I don't like it either, but we need information."

"But do we really need to get it from two people who never give information for free?" Stiles asks. "Are we really that desperate?"

"Yes," Isaac says, cutting in. "Boyd is dead. Along with Erica, the girl that saved me, and six sacrifices. We're desperate."

Stiles' gaze pivots from Scott to Isaac. Stiles and Isaac have always had a tumultuous sort of relationship. They never seem to be on the same side of things, but, regardless, Isaac trusts Stiles. Isaac *likes* Stiles. And with his next words, Stiles reminds Isaac exactly why that is. "Okay. Let's do this."

They meet Peter at Derek's loft. It's not Isaac's ideal meeting place, all things considered, but he doesn't protest.

Peter stands at the big loft window, staring out at the city below. The alpha symbol is still painted over the panes in harsh black lines, but a light rain has started to fall. Water droplets drip over the symbol, causing it to smear and fall away.

Isaac and Stiles wait in the entryway, watching Peter closely. Isaac spent a decent amount of time with Peter when he lived at the loft. Peter had reluctantly helped them find Boyd and Erica, and he loitered around more often than Derek liked. But, still, Isaac doesn't feel like he *knows* Peter. He doesn't have a grasp on him or his motivations. Maybe part of it is because Isaac wasn't involved in the supernatural world of Beacon Hills when Peter was the alpha, but he always feels like he's missing something. There's something about Peter that Isaac can't quite put his finger on.

Isaac certainly doesn't feel safe around Peter, that's for sure.

Peter doesn't turn from the window. There's no greeting. He just starts talking. "When Derek and I were younger, we were almost caught by hunters. We slipped inside an old root cellar. We stayed there for *two days*. Waiting, hiding. That's what we're taught to do when the hunters find us: hide and heal."

"Okay, so, is two days standard then, or are we thinking Derek's on, like, some extended getaway?" Stiles asks. He's pacing back and forth, annoyance tinting his tone.

"Why do you care?" Peter questions, finally turning to face them. Peter's focus is locked in on Stiles, he doesn't even spare Isaac a glance.

Isaac flits his gaze between the two of them. There's a strange dynamic here. Isaac would never say this out loud, but Stiles and Derek share some similarities. Namely, they both seem to have a unique relationship with everyone they meet. Although, where Derek seems to have animosity with everyone, Stiles has connection. Stiles always appears to have a read on people, like he knows them better than they want him to.

That might be an advantage where Peter is involved.

"Why do I care?' Let's see: because over the last few weeks, my best friend's tried to kill himself." Isaac's eyes whip over to Stiles. He didn't know that, but there's no time for questions as Stiles barrels ahead, "His boss nearly got ritually sacrificed. A girl that I've known since I was three *was* ritually sacrificed. Boyd was killed by alphas. I – Do you want me to keep going? 'Cause I can, all right? *For, like, an hour.*"

"You think Derek can do anything about that?" Peter asks, walking away from the window and closer to Stiles.

"Well, since he's the one everyone seems to be after, it's more like he should do something about it, yeah," Stiles says. He's still pacing, but he doesn't seem nervous. Exasperated, yes, but not worried. He might not trust Peter, but if he has any trepidation about being here, he doesn't show it.

"I don't know. There's something different about Derek now. He's not like he was when we were younger," Peter says.

"What was he like?" Isaac asks, finally breaching the conversation. Isaac tries not to be obvious about it, but he's eager to learn more about Derek. Isaac's relationship with Derek is complicated, but

there's a mutual connection there. Even if they don't necessarily like each other at the moment, they still care about the other's well-being.

Peter looks over at Isaac. His gaze is piercing, but Isaac keeps his own expression steady and blank.

"A lot like Scott, actually," Peter says. "A lot like most teenagers: unbearably romantic, profoundly narcissistic, tolerable really only to other teenagers."

Isaac tries to imagine a younger, teenage Derek. He tries to imagine a version of Derek who is open and genuine, like Scott. Isaac's brain draws a blank.

The three of them have slowly gravitated toward the metal table by the window, gathering around it. Stiles leans forward, "And so what happened? What changed him?"

"Well, the same thing that changes a lot of young men..." Peter says. He tacks on, casually, like it's obvious, "A girl."

"You're telling me some girl broke his little heart? *That's* why Derek is the way he is?" Stiles asks, incredulous. He glances between Peter and Isaac, face shrouded in disbelief.

"Do you remember Derek before he was an alpha? Had blue eyes?" Peter spares Isaac a glance, but the question is clearly for Stiles. Isaac knows that Derek is a new alpha, knows that he stole the power from Peter, but he had never really stopped to consider what Derek was like as a beta. Isaac only ever remembers seeing one beta with blue eyes: Jackson.

"I just always thought it was like a genetic thing," Stiles says. He looks kind of embarrassed, enough so that Isaac knows the statement is genuine. Isaac hides his smile behind his hand, pretending to rub his hand over his jaw.

"If you want to know what changed Derek, you need to know what changed the color of his eyes," Peter says. His voice is dramatic and ominous. Isaac watches as Stiles barely contains the urge to roll his eyes.

The three of them settle in for story time. Peter sits on the couch that Isaac used to call his bed while Isaac and Stiles take their spots on the stools around the metal table. So far, Peter seems all too willing to share the tale. It's surprising and unsettling. Isaac can't shake the

feeling that something is amiss.

“When Derek was a sophomore, he met a girl named Paige. Derek had never shown interest in anyone before Paige. Not for lack of options. In fact, Paige appealed to Derek because she *didn’t* like him at first,” Peter explains. None of it surprises Isaac. Derek is handsome now, so, of course, he was popular in high school.

“How’d they meet?” Stiles asks.

As Peter tells them about Derek’s basketball friends and Paige’s cello rehearsal, Isaac watches Stiles. His eyebrows are furrowed. He’s paying attention to every minute detail of the story. He’s listening intently, in search of any clues that could help them better understand Derek.

Isaac takes a different approach. He takes the story at face value, listening for the bigger picture. Isaac hopes that with Stiles on the details and him on the full scope, the two of them will be able to cover all their bases. This is a rare opportunity. They don’t want to miss any of the guidance Peter is offering.

“Okay, so, if Derek was a sophomore back then, how old was he?” Stiles asks. “How old were you?” He takes a good look at Peter and adds on, “How old are you now?”

“Not as young as we could have been, but not as old as you might think,” Peter says. This is what Isaac doesn’t like about Peter. Everything he says is a riddle or a double entendre. It makes him impossible to work with. It makes him impossible to trust.

“Okay, that was frustratingly vague,” Stiles says. He spares Isaac a glance. Stiles’ face contorts, eyebrows drawn up and together, lips turning down at the corners. The expression’s meaning is clear as crystal: *can you believe this guy?*

Isaac’s lips quirk up in a hesitant smile. He and Stiles may have finally found an opinion they can agree on. Isaac hears Derek’s voice saying, *nobody likes him*. The statement rings truer than ever.

When Isaac looks back to Peter, his expression is smug. Sometimes, Isaac isn’t sure whether Peter says these things just to get a rise out of people, or if his motivation is more calculated and villainous than that. It’s probably a combination of the two.

Stiles sighs, “Okay, I’m just gonna drop it. What happened to Derek

and the cello girl?"

"What do you think happened? They were teenagers. One minute it's, 'I hate you, don't talk to me.' The next, it's frantic groping in any dark corner they could manage to find themselves alone in for five minutes," Peter says. "Their favorite dark corner was an abandoned distillery outside of Beacon Hills."

"Okay, hold up, how do you know all this?" Isaac asks, nose crinkling in disgust.

Stiles adds on, "Yeah, you just said that they were alone."

Peter leans forward, "Back then, I wasn't just Derek's uncle. I was his best friend, his closest confidante. *That's* how I know."

Isaac watches Stiles' face for any sort of reaction, trying to gauge whether he's buying into Peter's words. Stiles flashes Isaac a quick moment of eye contact, but otherwise his expression stays still.

Peter falls back into the story, "One night, when they were at the distillery, Derek noticed something: the scent of blood and footsteps approaching. Fortunately, Derek and Paige ran off before the others arrived."

"What others?" Isaac asks.

"Deucalion, Kali, Ennis. Before they killed them, they each had a pack of their own. They lived in the areas surrounding Beacon Hills. One of Ennis' betas had been caught by the Argents. He was strung up and cut in half in that very distillery," Peter says. Isaac gulps. "Ennis had called all the packs together, trying to rally them against the hunters. But he couldn't do that without the support of my sister, Derek's mother, Talia Hale."

Isaac wonders how Peter knows the details of this meeting without actually being there, but he doesn't bother asking. Peter wouldn't give a straight answer anyway.

"Talia was something of a leader. She was powerful, and the other alphas respected her," Peter explains. He moves to stand, walking back over to the window. He glances up at the alpha pack's symbol. Then, he continues, "I suppose Ennis thought she would sympathize with his cause, but she didn't. Talia wasn't against change, but her priority was survival. She knew that any action from the werewolves would end in a full blown war with the hunters."

Peter glances back at Stiles and Isaac. There's a grave look on his face, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. It's performative.

"Ennis didn't understand. He made a stand that night. He carved a symbol into the wall of the distillery." Peter traces a spiral with his finger in the condensation on the window. "Our mark for vendetta."

"Man, you guys really take that revenge thing to, like, a whole new level, don't you?" Stiles asks. He's leaning forward, elbows propped up on the table, hands fiddling. He seems so at ease. Isaac doesn't understand it. Isaac's own posture is rigid, back straight and hands folded in his lap. Isaac is on edge, he's *uneasy*.

"It's not just revenge," Peter says. He gives Isaac a pointed look, eyes narrowed. "Losing a member of your pack isn't like losing family. It's like losing a limb."

Isaac swallows. There's a burning in his eyes, but he ignores it.

"They wouldn't even let him see the body," Peter says. "He wasn't family, and the circumstances of the death made it a homicide investigation..."

"I don't get it," Isaac says. In an attempt to change the subject to something that hurts a little less, he asks, "What does this have to do with Derek?"

"Everything," Peter says. He turns away from the window, walking towards Stiles and Isaac. "It's never just a single moment. It's a confluence of events. Personally, I looked at Ennis' circumstances, I saw profound loss." Peter leans forward, resting his hands on the table and shaking his head. "Derek saw something different. He saw opportunity."

"Opportunity?" Stiles asks. "To do what?"

"To always be with her," Peter says. He pauses, then says, "Derek loved Paige, and she loved him. They were happy... except the thing was, he had this constant fear. He was obsessing over it, thinking about it all night, all day, always on his mind. *What would happen when she found out?* Derek was convinced that there was only one way for them to always be together: turn her."

There's something not quite right. Peter's heartbeat is steady and it's certainly not out of character for Derek to turn teenagers into werewolves – Isaac is proof of that – but there's something off.

"I kept telling him not to do it," Peter continues. "Everyday the more he thought about it, the more convinced he became. You know teenagers. I bet he even blames me." Peter's voice sounds wet with emotion, and when he looks at Isaac, his eyes are shiny. "He's probably convinced himself the whole thing was my idea."

Peter swallows. He maintains eye contact with Isaac for a long moment before he deflects his gaze over to Stiles. "Derek knew his mother would never do it, and the other alphas wouldn't be in town much longer. His window of opportunity was shrinking. He was desperate and blinded by love, by the fear of losing Paige. Derek is stubborn, always has been. I couldn't change his mind. He was convinced it was the right thing to do, that the bite was a gift."

The bite is a gift. It's a familiar sentiment. One Isaac has heard before, and, based on the look on Stiles' face, he has too.

"While Derek was planning how to turn Paige, Ennis' outburst caused trouble to brew between the werewolves and the hunters. Deucalion, who still had his sight and his rationality, was a trusted ally of Talia's. This is where the Celtic druids come in," Peter says. "The legend goes that the druids were the ones who taught the first werewolves, Lycaon and his sons, how to shift back and forth between man and wolf."

"Why the druids?" Isaac asks.

"According to myth, the druids themselves had the ability to shape-shift. They taught Lycaon and his sons how to control the shift, and they became important advisors to the pack. They became the emissaries," Peter says.

"Okay, but what exactly is an emissary?" Stiles asks.

"They keep us connected to humanity, but they're a secret even within the pack. Sometimes, only the alpha knows who the emissary is. Derek had no idea about Deaton," Peter pauses. "Or his sister, Morrell."

"She's an emissary too?" Stiles asks, shocked. He glances between Isaac and Peter. Isaac gives a small shrug, feeling just as caught off guard by the information.

"For the alpha pack," Peter says, like it's no big deal. It is decidedly a very big deal.

"Our guidance counselor?" Isaac asks, voice raising in volume.

“Why the hell don’t you people tell us any of this stuff, huh?” Stiles interrogates. “I shared some really intimate details with her!”

Isaac is used to being the last to know. Isaac isn’t surprised that *he* wasn’t told the information, but the fact that Stiles was similarly out of the loop is unexpected. Usually, Stiles has that all-knowing, arrogant quality about him. Seeing him frazzled and shocked serves as a reminder that Stiles and Scott, while appearing like they know what they’re doing, are also just teenagers. It shouldn’t be a reassuring reminder, but, somehow, it is.

“And did she give you good advice?” Peter asks.

Stiles pauses. Some of the anger leaves his voice when he says, “Actually, yeah.”

“That’s what they do. That’s what Deaton used to do for Talia,” Peter says, getting back to the story at hand. “Deucalion wanted to arrange a meeting with Gerard. At the time, Deucalion was a more rational man. He wanted to end the fighting between the hunters and the werewolves, but not through war. He wanted a peace meeting. Talia and Deaton both advised against the idea, as you both are aware, Gerard is not a man who can be reasoned with. Unfortunately, Deucalion was not easily deterred. He was having the meeting, no matter what... and *this* provided the perfect distraction for me to approach Ennis.”

“Ennis? Why would you choose him?” Isaac asks. Of all the alphas, Ennis seemed the most intimidating (by sheer size alone) and the least intelligent.

“Why not?” Peter counters. “Ennis needed a new member for his pack. Paige was young and strong. Doing a favor for Derek meant Ennis would be in good with Talia. Back then, everyone wanted to be in good with her.”

“So what happened?” Stiles asks.

“On the next full moon, Paige stayed late at the school. When she was leaving, Ennis was waiting for her. Derek stayed in the locker room. He couldn’t watch, but he listened to every breath and every heartbeat. He couldn’t watch, but he listened as Ennis attacked Paige, the first girl he ever loved.”

“He doesn’t remember it was Ennis, does he?” Stiles questions.

"If he does, he keeps it to himself," Peter says, which is just so typical of Derek. He keeps everything bottled up inside until, apparently, he snaps and disappears for days.

"So did he turn her?" Isaac asks.

"Almost," Peter says. Isaac frowns. He doesn't like the sound of that. "At the last moment, Derek must have changed his mind because he came at Ennis. A fifteen year old boy against a giant."

Isaac has fought Ennis before. He and Scott faced off against the alpha during the attack on Deucalion. The two of them had been no match for Ennis together, let alone trying to fight him one-on-one. Isaac can't imagine that a teenage Derek would have much better luck.

"There was no reason for him to fight," Peter says. "She'd already been bitten."

"So did she turn?" Isaac asks, repeating his earlier sentiment.

"She should have," Peter says. "Most of the time, the bite takes... Most of the time."

"When you offered it to me, you said, 'if it doesn't kill you.'" Stiles says, and isn't that news to Isaac. If it weren't for the somber atmosphere laying heavy over the room, Isaac may have reacted differently. Instead, he just stares at Stiles for a long moment.

A newfound respect for Stiles starts to grow within Isaac. When Derek had offered him the bite, even with the mention that it might kill him, Isaac felt helpless to do anything but agree. And yet, Stiles is sitting here, brave enough to have turned it down. Isaac is impressed.

"If," Peter emphasizes. "I found them back in that same root cellar. Derek was cradling her body in his arms. He asked me what was happening to her. He knew the answer, though. It didn't matter that she was young and strong. Some people just aren't made for this."

Isaac watches as Stiles' face twitches. He looks bothered, almost offended, and his eyes are glassy. Isaac forces himself to look away.

"But she fought," Peter says, like it matters, like it somehow makes her death more tragic. It doesn't. "She struggled desperately, trying to survive. And this, this is the real kicker. As she was clinging to life in his arms, she revealed that she had known he was a werewolf all along."

“She *knew*?” Isaac clarifies, surprised to hear the emotion in his own voice. He swallows the lump in his throat.

“Yes, she knew. She knew, and she still loved him,” Peter says. He shakes his head. “She knew she was going to die, and, eventually, the pain became too much. She begged Derek to do it, and, in one last act of true love, Derek released her from her suffering.”

Isaac lets out a soft, quiet gasp. For Derek to lose the first person he loved is one thing, but for him to have been the one to end her life... It's a whole new level of tragedy. So much of who Derek has become is starting to make sense to Isaac.

“I remember taking her body from his arms, to a place where I knew that it would be found... Another in a long line of Beacon Hills animal attacks,” Peter says.

“And what about Derek?” Isaac asks. His voice is wobbly and his vision is slightly blurry from the unshed tears in his eyes.

“Taking an innocent life takes something from you as well, a bit of your soul... darkening it. Dimming the once brilliant, golden yellow to a cold, steel blue... like mine.” Peter glows his real eyes, revealing a ring of luminescent blue.

Isaac remembers Boyd's golden, yellow eyes. He remembers watching them flicker out as the life left his body. It's proof that Boyd wasn't the one who killed Erica. Isaac had never had the heart to ask Boyd what actually happened to her, but, now, with both of them gone, he finds comfort in the knowledge that she didn't die at Boyd's hand.

Peter stands, eyes back to normal, and says, “Well. Story time is over.”

Stiles and Isaac share a look, both unsure what to say now. Stiles clears his throat. “Thanks, I guess.”

“So sincere,” Peter mocks, and then he makes for the door. He pulls it open with the usual metallic screech. He looks over at them and says, “I would wish you good luck finding Derek, but if he doesn't want to be found... well, you won't find him.”

Then, Peter leaves. He slams the door much more harshly than necessary, leaving only silence in his wake. Isaac and Stiles sit in the stillness for a moment, taking the time to process all the new information they just received.

The quiet stretches on until Isaac notices the look of perplexity across Stiles' face. He's thinking hard about something, almost like he's mulling over whether it's a good idea to share the thought or not. Isaac makes the decision for him.

"What?" He asks, leaning forward to make eye contact with Stiles. "What's this – What's this look on your face?"

"What look?" Stiles asks, playing dumb. Annoyance fills Isaac as he realizes that Stiles isn't mulling over whether the thought is plausible or makes sense; he's mulling over whether Isaac is the right person to tell.

"The kind of look that makes me want to punch you," Isaac says.

"Oh my god. You are so Derek's beta. I forgot," Stiles says, still deflecting.

"Well, what is with the look?" Isaac presses.

"I just don't believe him," Stiles finally admits. Isaac's first thought is: *that's it?* He thought they were already in agreement on that front. He thought that had been obvious.

"Me neither," Isaac says easily. "There was something off. I was kind of hoping you would know what it was."

Stiles' eyebrows raise and a small smile ghosts across his features. Then, he's turning to fully face Isaac and saying, "Okay, so, you know how in Ms. Blake's class we're reading *Heart of Darkness*? And it's in first person, right? Narrated by Marlow. The thing is that he's – he's an unreliable narrator. You know the details of it have changed, you know, just because of his perspective."

Isaac nods, "Well, then, we heard the story from Peter's perspective."

"Right, and I don't think we got the full story," Stiles says with his usual brand of intensity.

"But how are we supposed to get the full story? Are you just going to ask Derek about the girl he fell in love with and then killed?" Isaac asks.

"If I have to... yeah."

They don't linger at Derek's loft for long. Stiles drives Isaac back to the McCall house where Scott is already waiting. The three of them sit in the living room and swap stories. Scott shares what he learned about Deucalion and Gerard, and Isaac and Stiles share what they learned about Derek and Paige.

Both parties have come to the same conclusion: they gained valuable information, but they don't trust their narrators, so it can only take them so far.

After the stories are shared, Stiles stands, "Everyone's going to be back at school tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah," Scott says, so Isaac nods along. Isaac isn't necessarily looking forward to returning to school with Boyd's death hanging over their group like a dark cloud, but he might as well bite the bullet. It'll be better to go through it together than to postpone the inevitable.

And so, Stiles bids them good night and heads home.

For a quiet moment, Isaac and Scott stand alone in the living room. Then, Scott breaks it, saying, "Knowing about this eye color thing probably would have saved you a lot of grief."

It takes Isaac a second to figure out what Scott is referring to, but then he remembers his dad and his brief stint as a fugitive. The phrase *innocent life* flashes through Isaac's mind. He starts to wonder whether his father would have been considered innocent. Who decides whether a life is innocent or not?

It's not a thought Isaac wants to dwell on, so he just shrugs and says, "It didn't take long for everyone to realize it was the kanima's doing."

Scott gives Isaac a weak smile. "We should get some sleep. Tomorrow is gonna suck, but we'll look out for each other, yeah?"

Isaac returns the smile. "Yeah."

—

In bed that night, Isaac can't stop thinking about the similarities between the way Paige and Boyd died in relation to Derek. Derek is the reason they both got turned. Derek unwillingly killed them both. Derek held them both in his arms as they died.

Isaac can't stop reliving it.

He can hear the horrific sound of Derek's claws piercing Boyd's skin. It's echoing all around him. He can't escape it.

He can see the image of Derek's hands covered in Boyd's blood. It's burned into the back of his eyelids. He can't escape it.

He can feel the sensation of Boyd's body hitting the floor. He can feel the vibration through the floor. He can feel the water hitting his skin. He can't escape it.

Isaac can't stop reliving it. He can't escape it.

It all becomes too much and finally, finally he starts to cry. He cries for Erica, for the girl who saved his life, for Boyd, for Derek, and for Paige too. Isaac cries for all of them. He even sheds a tear or two for his father.

Isaac cries until his body has nothing left to give, and then he cries a little more. He cries until sleep starts to pull him under, and then he cries a little more. He cries until he can't, and then he cries a little more.

He cries.

The Girl Who Knew Too Much

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 9

Word count: 4,790

"There was another sacrifice last night." Scott and Isaac are about to leave for school when Scott drops the bomb.

"Wait, what? Last night?" Isaac clarifies. When Scott nods, Isaac continues, feeling a bit put out, "Why didn't you wake me? I could've helped."

"I thought you could use the extra sleep, and, besides, we were too late anyway," Scott says with a one shouldered shrug, helmet tucked under his other arm. The words cause Scott's eyes to turn sad. Isaac's hurt feelings immediately dissipate.

Isaac asks, "Who was it?"

"Tara. She was a deputy," Scott says.

Isaac nods. He doesn't really know what else to say. He feels powerless in the worst way. "Do we have a plan?"

"Not really. We've tried to stop the sacrifices as they happen, but it's just not working," Scott heaves a sigh. "I think our only chance at ending this is finding out who the darach is."

"Any leads?"

"Well, if the emissaries are druids, and the darach is a dark druid... the emissary to the alphas fits, right?" Scott says. His voice sounds so unsure. Isaac hates that.

"You really think it might be Morrell?" Isaac asks.

"No, but even if she's not, I have a feeling she knows more than she lets on," Scott says.

"It's a start," Isaac says. He has to admit that, as ridiculous as it sounds, Scott's theory does make sense. "Come on, let's get to school."

Scott and Isaac don't have their first period together, so once they arrive, they have to part ways. Scott places a hand on Isaac's shoulder (Isaac will never get used to such casual physical affection) and says, "Remember: we keep an eye on each other today, okay?"

"Okay," Isaac says.

Isaac makes his way to his first class of the day, economics with Coach, easily ignoring the feeling of the student body's eyes following him. Being a suspect in his own dad's murder, as brief as that time was, definitely brought a lot of attention to Isaac. In turn, Isaac has gotten good at blocking out the stares.

Inside the classroom, Isaac takes his usual seat in the corner, quickly surveying the room. The only member of their group who shares this class with Isaac is Allison, but she's nowhere to be found. From his vantage point at the back of the class, Isaac has a good view of the entire room. He waits until the bell rings, constantly watching the classroom door, but Allison never shows.

Isaac pulls his phone out of his pocket, typing out a quick text to Scott: **Allison isn't here.**

Almost instantly, Scott messages back: **Are you sure? She said she would be.**

Isaac takes another glance around the room, but comes up empty handed. Coach still hasn't arrived yet either – typical behavior for him – so Isaac makes an impulse decision. He grabs his bag and slips out of the classroom unnoticed.

Isaac has a wide range of experience when it comes to sneaking in and out of Beacon Hills High School, and it comes in handy now. He escapes through the doors and into the parking lot without a single hiccup. From there, all Isaac has to do is keep his head down and act like he's not doing anything wrong. Fake confidence goes a long way.

Once Isaac is off school grounds, he sends Scott another message: **Focus on Morrell. I'll go check on her.**

Scott provides Isaac with the address for the Argent apartment and, fortunately, it's not too far from the school. It's still a bit of a trek, but

it's closer than Derek's loft. With the necessary information acquired, Isaac heads on his way.

As Isaac walks, he starts thinking about what could have happened to Allison, especially with the entire alpha pack living only a floor above her. His thoughts continue to spiral, and, as they do, Isaac picks up the pace.

Isaac ends up in a full blown sprint, skidding to a stop outside the apartment complex. Isaac briefly considers entering through the front door, but decides against it. It's too much of a risk. Isaac could run into one of the alphas or even Allison's dad, who Isaac has to admit he's still a bit intimidated by. It's better to be safe than caught.

(And maybe, just maybe, part of Isaac's decision is dictated by his desire to avoid riding in the elevator.)

And so, Isaac rounds the side of the building, trailing his eyes up to the fourth floor. Luckily for Isaac, each subsequent story has its own set of windows, all of which are paired with a small balcony. The balconies aren't connected to each other like a fire escape would be, but Isaac thinks he'll be tall enough to climb from one to another. Operating on pure adrenaline, Isaac does just that.

In a matter of moments, Isaac makes it up to the fourth floor. Here, Isaac takes a pause, catching his breath. He stands with his back against the exterior wall, making sure to keep out of sight. Isaac hopes that, in the event that something is wrong, he'll be able to use sneaking through the window to his advantage. Isaac will have the element of surprise.

Slowly, Isaac creeps towards the cracked window. All he has to do is push it open and climb inside. Isaac inches along the wall, reaching his arm out. He's about to make contact with the window, but then, out of nowhere, a hand grabs his shirt. Isaac is tugged carelessly into the apartment, body slamming face first onto the floor. Before he has time to react, he's turned over onto his back and a knife is pressed to his throat.

Allison kneels above him. She stares down at him, dagger held tight in her hand.

Isaac stares up at her, fingers flexing where his hands are placed palms up by his head.

As recognition registers, Allison asks, "What do you think you're

doing?”

Isaac pants. His neck instinctively tilts back, trying to keep as much distance between his throat and the blade as possible. “You weren’t at school.”

“Did Scott send you to check up on me?” she asks.

“Uh, maybe he’s worried about you,” Isaac says with a stutter. It’s not exactly a lie, he just isn’t correcting her assumption. Scott didn’t directly send Isaac, but that might as well have been what happened.

“I can take care of myself,” Allison says. The anger is still present in her voice, but it’s quieter now.

“Yeah, I’ve noticed,” Isaac says. He risks a glance down at his current compromised position before meeting her eyes again. “More than once.”

Allison cracks a smile. Finally, she pulls the knife away from Isaac’s neck, freeing him from any immediate danger. Then, more dignified than she has any right to be, Allison stands. She runs her fingers through her hair and sets the familiar dagger aside.

It’s then that Isaac starts to question what he’s doing here. Scott didn’t send him. Isaac came of his own volition. Isaac hardly knows Allison. She’s given him no reason to like her and, if Isaac’s being honest, he’s given her no reason to like him either. And yet, here Isaac is, laying on her bedroom floor. Maybe it should be awkward, but, despite not necessarily liking each other, Isaac and Allison have a mutual respect for each other. It’s enough for Isaac to push himself up off the floor and offer to help. “So. Why weren’t you at school?”

Allison gives Isaac a once over, almost like she’s deciding whether or not to trust him. After a moment, she caves, “Follow me, it’s easier if I show you.” She leads Isaac down the hallway, explaining as she goes. “My dad has a map where he’s been charting all the sacrifices, even the ones that haven’t happened yet.”

“Okay, okay, hold on a second. Your dad’s the killer?” Isaac asks. Isaac assumed Allison had found something related to the sacrifices, but he never would have guessed this. This is insane.

“No,” Allison says, entering her dad’s office. Isaac hesitates outside the door for half a second before he gets with the program and follows. Allison sounds genuine and nervous when she adds on, “I mean, I

don't think he is at least. I hope he isn't."

"You hope he isn't the serial-killing dark druid who's been slashing people's throats?" Isaac asks, bewildered.

"Yeah," Allison says with a nod.

"Right," Isaac says, like this is an entirely normal conversation to be having. (It's not, it's insane.)

"Do you want to help me or not?" Allison says, gesturing towards her father's desk.

"Yeah, I'm just – I'm just trying to get all the cards on the table here," Isaac says.

Allison picks up a handheld blacklight, clicking it on. She shines the light over the map of Beacon Hills laid out across the table. As she does, notations start to appear.

"See the marks?" Allison asks. "There are five more bodies to be found, but it doesn't say who the bodies are."

Allison is standing close to the table, body almost pressed against it as she peers over each individual label. Isaac tries something else. Slowly, he takes a step away. Isaac leans his weight backwards so he's looking at the map from an angle. Isaac changes his perspective.

Allison turns to Isaac, watching his movements. She looks between him and the map. "What are you doing?"

"Something I learned from my father. Take a step back, look at the whole picture. Sometimes, you see things you wouldn't notice if you're up close when all you're looking at are the details," Isaac explains, never taking his eyes off the map.

Allison follows his lead. She steps backward, shoulder knocking lightly into Isaac's. He shifts to the side, giving them both space, but keeping his attention glued to the map.

It doesn't take long for Allison to spot something.

"Look at that. You see that?" Allison asks quietly. She reaches for the map on the table, carefully moving it out of the way. As she does, she reveals an intricate pattern built into the wood of the desk.

"Whoa," Isaac exclaims in hushed surprise. He runs his fingers over

the swirling design. “What is that?”

“A five fold knot. It’s a Celtic symbol,” Allison says.

Caught up in the revelation, Isaac forgets about his usual inhibitions surrounding physical touch and takes hold of Allison’s hand. Together, they guide the blacklight over one of the circles formed within the Celtic knot. A word appears before them. Isaac reads out, “Virgins.”

They move the light to the next circle. Allison says, “Warriors.”

The next circle, Isaac says, “Healers.”

The fourth circle, Allison reads, “Philosophers.”

With each new category, the tension builds. They bring the light over the center circle, and with rising dread, Isaac reads out, “Guardians.”

Isaac releases Allison’s hand. She switches the light off, and instantly the words fall away. For a moment, the pair just stand there in stunned silence, staring at each other as it all starts to come together.

“The deputy,” Allison says, breaking through the layer of shock. In a rush, she says, “It’s guardians. The next group is guardians. We have to call Stiles. We have to warn him.”

Isaac immediately nods his agreement. Hastily, Allison pulls her phone out of her pocket and dials. It seems to ring forever, but then Stiles’ voice cuts in, “*Hello? Allison?*”

“Isaac and I found out what the last two groups are. It’s guardians and philosophers,” Allison says without any preamble.

“*Philosophers?*” Stiles asks. Even through the phone, the surprise and confusion is evident in his voice.

“And guardians,” Allison reiterates. “Which after last night, has to mean something like law enforcement, right?” She phrases it like a question, like she’s trying to soften the blow, but they both know there’s nothing else it could be. “Stiles, you have to tell your dad. Tell him whatever you need, but you have to get him to believe. Tell your dad, warn him.”

Realization is starting to dawn on Isaac. There’s no way Stiles is going to be able to convince his father that the supernatural is real. Not without help. Not without proof.

"Okay, okay, okay, I know, but..." Stiles is having the same epiphany. *"I'm going to need help proving it."*

Allison turns to Isaac. He gives a small nod, and she says, "Isaac will be your proof. We'll meet you at your house."

"Okay, okay, yeah. See you soon," Stiles agrees before hanging up.

Allison holds her phone in her hands, looking at Isaac with wild, borderline scared eyes. He takes a breath and, in an attempt at being pragmatic, says, "Look, we'll go to Stilinski's, and then we'll figure out what's happening with your dad. There's still time."

Allison folds her arms over her chest. It's like she's sinking in on herself. "I have to stop him."

"Is that really a good idea? I mean, if your dad is actually doing all this stuff--"

"If?" Allison cuts him off. "Look at this. He knows everything. He's – He's planned everything." Her eyes are shiny and her voice nearly breaks.

Allison shakes her head. Her back straightens. In an instant, her entire demeanor shifts. The desperate fear disappears as quickly as it came, replaced by frantic motivation. Allison grabs the map and starts taking pictures of every marking left behind.

Isaac can only watch, completely caught off guard and unsure whether he should say something.

When she finishes, Allison folds the map small enough that it fits in her jacket pocket. She clears her throat. "Okay. Let's go. We don't want to keep Stiles waiting."

Isaac flounders for a moment. He wants to say something, but Allison is already halfway out the door. Isaac is helpless to do anything but follow her.

Allison leads them to the elevators. Isaac hesitates. He can't help but remember what happened last time he was stuck in a small space with Allison. Isaac swallows his nerves and steps inside.

When they exit the elevator, fortunately without a hitch, Allison takes long, fast strides towards her car. It's not difficult for Isaac to keep up, but, still, he's worried. They're rushing. Rushing is never good.

It's obvious Allison is wrought with emotions, but she refuses to give Isaac any reason to voice his concerns. Her hand is steady when she puts the key in the ignition, her driving is smooth when they're on the road, her heartbeat stays even the entire time. She shows no outward signs of panic, so Isaac keeps his mouth shut.

When they pull up outside the Stilinski household, Isaac unbuckles his seatbelt, but Allison doesn't follow suit. The car is in park, but the engine is still running. Allison's phone is in her hand.

"A teacher was taken from the school," she says, glancing between Isaac and her phone.

"A teacher?" Isaac asks, confused. "What's the pattern?"

"It doesn't matter," Allison says. Her voice is firm. Her earlier emotion is nowhere to be found. All that's left is fierce determination. "Isaac, I can't wait. There's no time. I have to confront him."

"You shouldn't go alone," Isaac says.

"You said you knew I could take care of myself," Allison says. "Here's your chance to prove that you meant it."

It's a cheap trick and she knows it. Isaac really does believe that Allison can protect herself, but this is different. This isn't herding Boyd into the school or a group fight against the alpha pack. This is the endgame.

"I'm just going to talk to him," she says, seeing that Isaac isn't fully convinced. "Besides, he's my *dad*. He's not going to hurt me."

The words strike a chord within Isaac. His body goes rigid. There's a moment where he knows the hurt is written all over his face, but he quickly schools his expression back to neutral.

The sun is starting to set, and Isaac knows he has to make a decision. He weighs his options, and, finally, he accepts defeat. There's no convincing Allison to wait, and Stiles can't do this alone. Isaac has to trust in Allison's conviction. It's the only option. It's certainly not the decision Scott would make, and it might cause Isaac to lose favor with him, but it's the only one he can rationalize.

"Be careful," Isaac says, locking eyes with Allison. He waits for her nod, and only then does he step out of the car.

Isaac watches as Allison reverses out of the driveway. He sighs, “Oh, this is so not going to end well.”

Isaac knocks on the front door, which seems ridiculous given the current situation, but he can’t just waltz right in. Stiles opens the door for him, rushing Isaac down the hall toward his bedroom. Stiles’ energy is even more frenzied than it usually is.

“What’s the plan?” Isaac asks.

“Uhh... I – I’m gonna show him the whole board,” Stiles says, gesturing towards his desk.

There’s a chessboard set up on the desk with pieces lined up and labeled. Isaac takes a step closer to examine the board. There’s three pieces labeled in pink: Scott, Derek, and Peter. On the opposing side are three pieces labeled in purple: Allison, Kate, and Argent. Off to the side are two stray pieces: one labeled in yellow, Jackson, and the other labeled in blue, Deaton.

“How come I’m not on the board?” Isaac asks.

Stiles stops fidgeting, going completely still. His expression drops into one of exasperated annoyance. “That’s what you’re worried about?”

“I feel like I should be on the board,” Isaac says with a shrug.

Stiles mutters unintelligibly under his breath. He grabs another pink sticky note, scribbling down *Isaac*. Stiles makes eye contact with Isaac as he pointedly places the label on one of the pawns.

“I’m a *pawn*?” Isaac asks, offended.

Stiles’ mouth opens and closes rapidly, but before he can retort, Sheriff Stilinski walks in. Isaac startles. He should have heard Stilinski come in – if not through the front door, then at least down the hallway – but he didn’t. Isaac didn’t hear anything.

Isaac doesn’t have time to dwell on it because Stiles is saying, “Dad! I – okay, I have to tell you something. Something important.”

“Son...” the sheriff sighs, looking between Stiles and Isaac. He seems confused by Isaac’s presence, but he doesn’t mention it. Instead, he adds, “I’m not trying to dismiss you, but I am very busy.”

“I know! I know, but what I’m going to tell you it’s – it’s going to help you, I promise,” Stiles says.

The sheriff gives a hesitant nod and enters the room. Stiles takes up his pacing again.

Isaac, feeling a little dizzy, takes a step back and sits on the edge of Stiles’ bed. Isaac blames the dizziness on his nerves. Revealing that he’s a werewolf to the town sheriff is a daunting prospect. There’s no telling what he’ll do or say. Isaac knows that, short term, it might not go so well. He can only hope that, long term, the sheriff being in the know will help decrease the rapidly growing body count of Beacon Hills.

“Okay, okay, okay, okay,” Stiles mutters, still pacing. Sheriff Stilinski spares Isaac a glance. Isaac gives him what he hopes is a reassuring smile.

“Yes, okay,” Stiles says, gesturing towards the sheriff like he’s going to begin, but then he loses his nerve and falls back. “No, oh–”

“Stiles.” Sheriff Stilinski warns, arms folded. His impatience is obvious in both his voice and body language.

“Dad, I’m sorry, okay? I’m just, I’m trying to–” Stiles stops in front of his dad, shaking his head. “I’m just trying to figure out how to start here.”

“Hey,” Stilinski says, not unkind but also not lenient, “I don’t have this kind of time.”

Isaac knows it’s wrong, but he’s waiting for the scene to blow up right before his eyes. He’s waiting for the yelling. Or worse, the calculated anger.

“Okay, well, um, for the last year, you’ve had all these cases that you couldn’t figure out, right?” Stiles finally begins. “I mean, all the murders involving Kate Argent, and then Matt killing all the people who had drowned him, and all these murders right now. It’s like – It’s like you’ve been playing a losing game.”

“Stiles, the last thing I need right now is a job performance review from my own son,” Sheriff Stilinski says.

Stiles winces and sighs, realizing how his words are coming across. “I know.”

It's strange for Isaac to see Stiles like this. Sure, Isaac has seen Stiles discombobulated and anxious, but Isaac has never seen Stiles at a loss for words. Isaac realizes that Stiles is scared. He's not scared *of* his dad, at least not in the way Isaac used to be, but he *is* scared.

"The reason you're losing the game is 'cause you've never been able to see the whole board," Stiles says. He motions towards the chess set on his desk, and says, "I need to show you the whole board."

Stilinski looks between the chessboard and his son. Isaac watches closely, waiting for him to snap. He doesn't. Rather, Stilinski heaves a breath and takes a seat on the far side of the desk. Stiles sits across from him, almost as if they were actually going to play the game.

With the board in front of him and nothing left to lose, Stiles regains some of his usual confidence. "Okay, so, Dad, the supernatural is real..." Stiles starts in on a very messy explanation; one that, even an informed Isaac, can hardly follow. Stiles rambles about werewolves and hunters and kanimas and darachs. He shares the theory that the darach was once an emissary to one of the members of the alpha pack. Isaac can't believe this is his life.

The whole thing is so convoluted it makes Isaac's mind spin. He tries to keep up, but his head is starting to hurt, like there's pressure swelling within his skull. Isaac rubs the heels of his hands into his eyes, trying to alleviate the build up.

Finally, Stiles' rambling fades out. Sheriff Stilinski looks just as worn out as Isaac feels. The sheriff runs a hand over his face. His voice is tired when he asks, "Scott and Derek... are werewolves?"

"Yes," Stiles says with as much conviction as he can manage. He must be at least a little bit aware of how idiotic all this sounds.

"And Kate Argent was a werewolf?" Sheriff Stilinski asks, pointing towards her chess piece.

"Hunter," Stiles says. He picks up the purple sticky tabs, "That's – Purple's hunter."

"Along with Allison and her father," Isaac chimes in, trying to be of some assistance.

Stilinski glances at Isaac. "Yeah," he says dubiously. "And – And my friend Deaton, the veterinarian, is a kanima?"

“What? No, no, no,” Stiles says, like he can’t believe his dad isn’t getting this. “He’s a druid, okay? Well, we think.” Stiles gestures between himself and Isaac. Isaac shoots him a small smile.

“So, who’s the kanima?” Stilinski asks.

“Jackson,” Stiles responds.

“No, Jackson’s a werewolf,” the sheriff argues.

“Jackson was the kanima first, and then Peter and Derek killed him, and he came back to life as a werewolf, now he’s in London,” Stiles runs on.

“Who’s the da-rack?” Stilinski asks.

“It’s da-rock.” Stiles is insufferable.

Isaac cuts in before Stilinski’s patience really runs dry, “We don’t know yet.”

“We don’t know yet,” Stiles affirms, having the decency to sound at least slightly sheepish.

“But he was killed by werewolves?” the sheriff asks.

“Slashed up and left for dead,” Stiles confirms.

“We think,” Isaac adds.

Stiles nods, gestures at Isaac, and mouths, “*We think.*”

The sheriff sighs and leans back in his chair, studying the chessboard. There’s a pause. Isaac wonders if this is the moment of truth. The moment where Stilinski pronounces his belief or disbelief.

It’s not. The jury’s still out. Instead, Stilinski asks, “Why was Jackson the kanima?”

Isaac almost sighs. This is ridiculous. The history of the kanima is so unimportant right now. Isaac’s not here to witness Stiles’s disastrous attempt at throwing together a last minute explanation. Isaac is here to be the proof. He’s here to flash his claws and get this over it. Still, Isaac doesn’t interrupt. He can’t be bothered to. There’s a feeling of tiredness starting to spread throughout his body, radiating from the inside out. It almost hurts.

“Cause sometimes the shape that you take reflects the person that you are,” Stiles says. He scrunches his nose a little, knowing that the explanation is lackluster. It’s the truth, sure, but it sounds absurd.

“And what shape would an increasingly confused and angrier by the second father take?” Stilinski asks, finally reaching the end of his rope. *This* is the moment of truth. The verdict is in. Stilinski does not believe them. Isaac can’t say he’s surprised.

“Uh, that would be more of an expression like the one you’re currently wearing,” Stiles says, chastened.

“Yeah,” Stilinski says, voice almost entirely air.

The sheriff stands, making to leave. Stiles jumps up, trying to stop him. He blocks the exit and says, “Dad. Dad, would you – I can prove it, okay? Look, he’s one of them,” Stiles gestures at Isaac. “A werewolf.”

The fatigue is getting intense now. It’s like all the energy has been zapped from his body. It’s like weakness coursing through his veins.

Suddenly, Isaac remembers what Peter said about losing a pack member being akin to losing a limb. Isaac wonders if that’s what this is, if his body is finally catching up to the loss of Erica and Boyd. Isaac rolls his shoulders back, trying to dislodge the feeling.

“Stiles, Stiles! That’s enough,” Stilinski says, pointing a finger at his son. Every time Isaac blinks he sees glimpses of his own father behind his eyelids.

“Dad, can you please just hold on?” Stiles asks desperately. The sheriff pauses in the doorway. Stiles turns to Isaac, “You ready?”

Isaac takes a second. He squeezes his eyes closed tight and gives the smallest of nods. Then, he makes to stand.

“All right, Dad, just watch this, okay?”

Isaac’s head fills with static. The room starts to spin. His vision swirls. Isaac can feel himself losing his balance, and then nothing. Darkness.

—

Isaac comes to gradually. The first thing he notices is the throbbing in his skull. There’s a faint beeping coming from his left, matching his

own heartbeat and the throb of pain. The second thing Isaac notices is the way his skin is slick with sweat. Isaac's lips curl down in a slight frown. Through the blariness, he starts to twitch. The third thing Isaac notices is a weight in his hand.

Isaac slowly blinks his eyes open.

Derek is sitting at Isaac's bedside. He's holding Isaac's sweaty hand in both of his own.

"Derek?" Isaac asks. His voice comes out scratchy and weak. Isaac swallows.

Derek looks over at Isaac with wide, frantic eyes. He drops Isaac's hand, and immediately moves up to the head of bed.

"Hey," Derek says, voice hushed. "Hey, I'm here."

Isaac blinks up at Derek. He can't believe what he's seeing, he can't believe Derek is really here, but his body is in too much distress to properly process the surprise. Isaac feels drained like he never has before.

"What's happening to me?" Isaac asks. He hears his own voice break with emotion, though it sounds foreign to his ears.

"I don't know, but I'm not leaving, okay?" Derek keeps his own red rimmed eyes locked on Isaac's. His voice is gentle but sure when says, "Not again."

Isaac wants to acknowledge the words, but he can't. Everything hurts, every movement and every limb. Isaac's eyes are starting to go wet. He recognizes the hospital for what it is, he can feel the bandage wrapped around his head, but he doesn't understand how he got here. He doesn't understand what went wrong. He doesn't understand.

Derek leans forward and strokes a hand through Isaac's hair.

Everything hurts and Derek... *Derek is here.* Isaac doesn't understand any of it, but he takes the comfort Derek gives. Isaac closes his eyes, a single tear slipping down his cheek.

Isaac starts to drift out of consciousness again. He doesn't want to. He's scared to let go, but he doesn't have a choice. Exhaustion is pulling him under, and Isaac is too weak to fight it.

Derek takes his hand. Isaac lets himself believe that Derek will stay. He holds onto the thought like a tether of hope. Derek won't leave. Not again.

The Overlooked

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 10

Word count: 1,032

Something is jostling Isaac. Sleep and wake war inside him, battling for control of his body and mind. Exhaustion is heavy in his limbs, but awareness is tugging at the corners of his brain. Isaac wants to remain in the peaceful fog of sleep. He wants to succumb to the fatigue plaguing his lungs, but he can't. The gentle but incessant shaking is aiding wake in the fight. Isaac wants to escape it, wants to roll away from the source, but he doesn't have the strength.

In the end, consciousness wins out.

Isaac opens his eyes, though it's no easy feat. His eyelids are the heaviest thing in the world at the moment. As soon as he succeeds, bright lights invade Isaac's vision. He's momentarily blinded, but at least the jostling stops.

There's a hand on Isaac's shoulder. As Isaac's eyesight adjusts, the blurry silhouette comes into focus. It's Derek.

Isaac has no idea how much time has passed since he fell asleep, but Derek didn't leave. He's standing at Isaac's bedside, looking down at him. It's Derek's hand on Isaac's shoulder. Derek is still here.

"Isaac," Derek says, voice pitched low. "I have to go, but I promise I'll be back."

Consciousness won the battle, but it was a close victory. Isaac is still out of it, slipping in between the cracks. He mumbles, "What?"

"Stiles' dad was taken. I have to go, but I *promise* I'll be back," Derek repeats. Even to Isaac's jumbled brain, Derek sounds nervous. "In the meantime, I know it's not ideal, but Peter is coming to take my place."

Isaac is too out of it to respond, too weak to move, so he just locks eyes with Derek. Then, sleep ambushes and Isaac falls into its clutches once again.

Derek isn't there when Isaac wakes up, but he hardly has a chance to notice. Isaac wakes with a start. His mouth is filling with saliva, a telltale sign that something disgusting this way comes. Isaac barely manages to lean over the bed in time. Black blood and mistletoe spew from Isaac's lips, splattering across the floor like a Jackson Pollock painting.

It's horrible and gross, but Isaac doesn't have the cognitive ability to dwell on it right now. Instead, he just collapses back in bed, and, almost immediately, Isaac passes out again.

Isaac vaguely registers two nurses helping him into a seated position, trying to get him out of the hospital gown and into his regular clothes. Isaac wants to help, but his mind and body are betraying him. His mind is fuzzy. It's full to the brim with white noise and static. His body is depleted. It keeps veering to the side as gravity and his own exhaustion weigh him down.

Sleep is rearing its ugly head once more. Isaac fights against the pull as much as he can, trying to keep his head above the tide.

Then, there's a familiar voice in Isaac's ear, saying, "Easy, Isaac. We've got you."

Melissa McCall.

Isaac, knowing he's in safe hands, allows himself to drift.

Isaac stirs. He forces his eyes open, just for a moment. He gets one brief glimpse of a dark, faintly green room. He gets one brief glimpse of Peter Hale standing beside him, other figures lingering in the background. Isaac gets one brief glimpse at his surroundings before his eyes fall shut again. Just one second.

Isaac stays on the brink of sleep for a moment longer. He listens to the chaos around him. There are voices arguing. Isaac can't make out any individual words, but he thinks he recognizes Scott's voice. There's rain pounding on the roof and a big crash of thunder.

Isaac blacks out again.

Isaac comes to with a gasp for breath. His eyes stay closed, but he coughs through the influx of much needed oxygen flooding his system. Isaac breathes in heavily. He gulps down air like it's a cold glass of water on a hot summer's day. Isaac desperately pulls in air until his lungs stop burning and his body settles.

Isaac's head lolls to the side. Briefly and instinctively, Isaac's eyes open. He catches a sliver of Stiles before the weight becomes too much to bear. Isaac drops his eyelids, letting them close.

Isaac can hear the blood rushing in his head. It's loud, almost overpowering, but not quite deafening. Isaac can just barely hear Stiles' voice breaking through. Most of the words disappear in the fog of Isaac's mind, but he does pick up on, "Put my mouth on yours."

Isaac disappears into darkness before he can process the words.

—

The next thing Isaac remembers is hearing Stiles' voice telling him to, "Just hold on a little longer, okay? Trust me, if anyone's gonna get us out of this, it's Scott."

Isaac is teetering on the edge of consciousness. He's barely awake, just on the brink of it. Still, he lets the words wash over him. It's a nice reassurance.

"Can't believe I just said that..." Stiles' voice comes with a wry chuckle. "You know, I actually used to be the one with the plan. Well, or at least a Plan B." Stiles sighs. "Now, I don't know. Now, I'm thinking maybe – maybe we are pretty much useless. Maybe all we really do is show up and find the bodies." Stiles pauses, then, "I don't want to find my father's body."

Stiles lets out a long exhale. Isaac is still drifting, still out of it. He's hearing Stiles' words, but it's a secondary thing. It's like Isaac is accidentally overhearing a conversation that he's not supposed to. It's distant and quiet, but still close enough, still loud enough, that Isaac *can* hear. He can hear, he just can't speak up.

"You know, you're a lot easier to talk to when you're completely unconscious."

That sends a spark of guilt through Isaac. The eavesdropping wasn't intentional, and it's certainly not Isaac's fault, but, still, Isaac feels culpable. Isaac vows to take Stiles' words with him to his grave, which

he seems to be fast approaching anyway.

With that thought, Isaac allows himself to fall away from the precipice and back into sleep once more.

Alpha Pact

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 11

Word count: 5,822

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Isaac finds himself in Derek's loft. Consciousness is still slipping through his fingers like grains of sand, but he recognizes the loft. He recognizes Derek back at his bedside. And he recognizes that he's dying.

Isaac can taste the blood on his lips. He can feel the pain in every inch of his body. He can feel his energy slowly draining. Isaac knows this is it.

Isaac has known for a while that his early death was imminent and inevitable. Even before he was turned, Isaac never was able to imagine living past high school. He always assumed that one day his dad would snap and go too far. Being turned, Isaac knew he was entering a dangerous world, knew he might risk a death like this. Isaac had known that, and he had welcomed it.

When Erica died, Isaac knew it was only a matter of time before he and Boyd went too. They became betas together, and they would die together. Isaac thought he had accepted that, but something had started to change. Something had started to shift. Isaac couldn't quite put his finger on what it was, but he knew Scott was at the center of it. When Boyd died, Isaac felt the ground shake beneath him. Isaac knew he was next, but he wasn't resigned to it anymore. Isaac wanted to fight it.

And yet, Isaac is dying. Here, with Derek at his side, Isaac is going to die. It's sort of poetic having Derek here. Isaac wonders if Derek will put him out of his misery, like he did with Paige. Isaac welcomes the thought. The pain is so much now. Isaac wants to let go, but he keeps fighting. He isn't ready to die.

Isaac feels Derek grab his hand. Relief comes in waves as Derek siphons the pain from Isaac's body. Isaac's breath shudders and he

gasps. Derek lets go and the pain comes back tenfold.

Isaac returns to the blackness.

Isaac's lungs burn. Every breath hurts. With each exhale, Isaac feels the life leave his body. This is going out. Isaac is sputtering out of existence.

Isaac squirms in the bed, trying to find some relief. Derek grabs his hand. Isaac, mustering up all the strength left inside him, squeezes his hand. It's barely there, just a mere twitch of his fingers, but Derek squeezes back. Derek brings his other hand up, cupping Isaac's between both of his.

Isaac might be dying, but he won't be alone. Isaac hopes Derek will forgive himself. Isaac's lips quiver, but he can't get them to move. He wants to tell Derek it's okay, but he's got nothing left in the tank. He's got nothing left to give.

Once again, Derek starts taking his pain. Relief washes over Isaac. He waits for the moment when the pain crashes back into him, but it never comes. Derek takes and takes and takes. Isaac's eyes fly open as his energy starts to repair itself.

Isaac's eyes go straight to Derek. Derek has both hands on Isaac's arm, still taking his pain. He's not stopping or slowing down. Derek's eyes glow red as he roars. The howl is so loud Isaac feels it in his bones.

All of Isaac's pain is being pulled right out of his body. It's an intensity that Isaac can't begin to describe. Isaac convulses, his back arches and his head tips back. Isaac gives a weak tug of his arm, but Derek holds tight.

Isaac watches in horror as the last of his pain leaves his body and Derek's eyes cool from a fiery red to an icy blue. Then, Derek collapses.

It's a disorienting experience. In less than a minute, Isaac goes from feeling like he's on the brink of death to almost good as new. It's a shock to Isaac's system. He pauses for a long moment, trying to reorient himself.

Fortunately, Peter, who Isaac hadn't noticed until now, swoops in to help Derek. Peter moves Derek into a better position, propping him up

against the back window. There's an expression on Peter's face that Isaac doesn't like.

Isaac slowly moves to sit up. The strength in his body has been restored, but he's cautious, afraid that at any moment he'll become incapacitated again. Isaac flexes his fingers, runs them through his hair, and wipes the black blood off his lips.

Isaac looks down at the floor where Derek is sitting. In a heartbeat, their positions were flipped. Isaac can't understand it.

Peter glances at Isaac, and says, "Derek will be fine."

"Wh—" Isaac clears his throat. "What happened?"

"Derek gave up being an alpha to save you," Peter says in his usual tone of cocky indifference.

Isaac feels his mouth drop open. Maybe it should have been obvious when Derek's eyes turned blue, but Isaac wasn't in his right mind to comprehend anything. Now, looking at Derek, Isaac feels the realization sink in.

Derek, who Isaac has only ever known to prioritize power, gave it all up for Isaac. Isaac feels his eyes start to well with tears. Isaac and Derek have always had a rocky relationship, but this decision changes everything. Derek has proven what Isaac has always wondered. Derek really does care about him.

The tears start to fall without Isaac's permission. He scrambles to join Derek on the floor, kneeling beside him. *Derek will be fine*, Isaac repeats to himself. Isaac doesn't know if he believes it yet.

"Now what?" Isaac asks Peter, searching for guidance. His mind is still reeling with the onslaught of energy and the implications of Derek's sacrifice.

"We wait, and then we wake him," Peter says. "Might I suggest a shower?"

Isaac's health might have been magically restored, but his hygiene was not. Isaac is still caked in a thin layer of sweat and grime. Isaac keeps looking at Derek. He doesn't want to leave his bedside.

Peter huffs. "Go."

Isaac listens, only because it's easier than protesting. Isaac still feels disoriented, like the whole planet has gone out of orbit and he was the last to know.

Isaac hasn't used this shower since before Derek kicked him out. Isaac remembers that night vividly. Prior, there was an unspoken bond between them: the bond of an alpha and his beta, the bond of two people with no one else in the world. After that night, something between them had broken. The bond had been shattered, and they were left more alone than before.

Now, Isaac can feel the wounds knitting together. Derek made the ultimate sacrifice. He didn't die for Isaac, but he gave up his power. He gave up his safety. He gave up security to save Isaac's life.

Isaac had deemed Derek selfish, but this was an act of pure selflessness. There was nothing for Derek to gain here. He did it purely out of affection for Isaac. Isaac can't believe it. He can't wrap his head around it. The more Isaac thinks about it, the more emotional he becomes.

Isaac takes the quickest shower of his life, desperate to get Derek back in his line of sight. Isaac doesn't trust Peter out there alone with a vulnerable Derek. Derek gave up everything to save Isaac's life. Isaac won't let it be in vain.

Isaac quickly towel dries his hair. He puts on his own jeans, but trades out his disgusting t-shirt for one of Derek's. Isaac exits, returning to the main room of the loft. Peter is still standing there, not moving, just watching Derek. It's unsettling.

Isaac grabs food from the kitchen, joining Peter at Derek's side. Then, Isaac finally asks the question that's been tickling at the back of his mind since he woke, "What happened?"

"To you? Jennifer poisoned you," Peter says simply.

"Jennifer?" Isaac asks.

"The teacher, Ms. Blake, she's the darach," Peter says.

"Wait, what?"

Peter repeats himself, but all Isaac can hear is static. He feels sick to his stomach. The memory of the night Boyd died instantly flashes across Isaac's mind. Isaac had prioritized Ms. Blake's life above all

else. He put everyone else at risk to save her, and Boyd had paid the ultimate price. Boyd died.

Isaac shakes his head. “No...”

“Yes,” Peter says. “Though it brings me no pleasure to say this, she tricked all of us. She took the sheriff and Melissa, and Argent is probably next.”

“She – She took Melissa?” Isaac asks. It just keeps getting worse.

“And forced Scott to go with Deucalion,” Peter says.

Isaac continues shaking his head, trying to force the words to make sense. None of it makes sense. Isaac was out of commission for a day and suddenly the world has fallen apart.

Derek makes a noise. It snaps Isaac out of his spiral.

Isaac scoots impossibly closer to Derek. He ignores anything that Peter might have to say and makes the executive decision that it’s time to wake him. Isaac grabs his water bottle, gently tilting Derek’s head back. Isaac carefully pours the cool water into Derek’s mouth.

Derek splutters, spilling some of the water down his chin. He instinctively sits up, swallowing and gasping. Eventually, he regains his composure and leans back. His eyes open. They land on Isaac. For a brief second, it’s like he’s looking right through him, but then recognition dawns.

“You’re okay,” Derek says. His voice is quiet, but his relief is evident.

Isaac can’t fight his smile. “I’m doing much better than you are right now.”

Derek doesn’t say anything, he just keeps looking at Isaac. There’s a faint smile on Derek’s lips. Isaac feels gratitude swell inside him.

“Derek,” he says, feeling his eyes go wet again. “You... Thank you.”

“I – I’m sorry. For everything.” Derek says quietly. Isaac can only tell because they’re sitting so close, but there are tears starting to form in Derek’s eyes as well.

“You saved my life, Derek,” Isaac says, like that’s explanation enough. Isaac wants to tell Derek that he’s more than made up for the pain he caused, but doesn’t want to cheapen the moment with a sentiment he

knows Derek won't believe.

"Had to," Derek says, simply. "Couldn't lose you too."

If Isaac is honest, it's all a bit awkward. Derek and Isaac aren't the type to share their feelings, and, with Peter standing by, it's hard to be vulnerable. But it's a good moment. For the first time, Isaac feels like he's seeing the truest version of Derek, the person that he is underneath all the scowls. The trust between them is being restored.

"Well, while this is all very touching, the full moon is tomorrow night, Derek. You drained your battery all the way to the red, and there is a fully charged alpha waiting to rip you limb from limb," Peter says, condescending as ever.

"I'll be fine in a few hours," Derek says. Isaac doesn't quite believe him, and he'd guess that Peter doesn't either, but neither of them say anything.

—

Less than an hour later, there's a knock on the door of the loft. Derek has since relocated to his bed where Isaac sits at his side, refusing to move. Peter, noting this, goes to the door with a small noise of annoyance.

Isaac tries not to stare directly at Derek, but he can't help it. He's worried about Derek's well-being, for one, but, also, he's still kind of awestruck. He's in awe of Derek's sacrifice, and he's pretty sure he always will be.

"You know," Derek says. "You don't have to just sit there watching me."

Isaac huffs, "Weren't you doing the same thing with me a few hours ago?"

"That was different. *You* were dying. *I* am on the mend," Derek says.

Isaac furrows his eyebrows, like maybe he doesn't fully believe that. Isaac doesn't voice his concerns, but he's certain Derek sees it on his face. Luckily, Isaac is spared whatever half-hearted protest Derek was about to subject him to when Peter walks in with Lydia at his heels.

"Boys," he says, "We have a visitor."

“Isaac,” Lydia says. There’s shock in her voice. “You’re okay?”

Isaac nods. He doesn’t really know what to say. He knows eventually everyone will find out about Derek’s sacrifice and newfound beta status, but he doesn’t know if it’s his place to share that information.

Peter spares Isaac the awkwardness, and says, “What can we do for you?”

“Argent’s been taken, which means Jennifer has all three guardians,” Lydia says. Isaac has to admit, it’s strange to see Lydia here, talking to Peter. The animosity is still very much present, but Lydia stays focused, adding, “We have to find the nemeton. It’s where she’s keeping them.”

“As much as I would love to be of service, we don’t know where the nemeton is,” Peter says, not sounding very apologetic.

“You don’t know where it is?” Lydia asks, annoyance and disbelief painting her tone. “But Stiles said you and Derek have been there.” Lydia spares Derek a quick glance. He’s visibly weak, but she courteously doesn’t mention it.

“We *have*, but after a few memorable experiences there, Talia – Derek’s mother and my older sister – decided that she didn’t ever want us going back. She knew how dangerous it was and took the memory of its location from us,” Peter explains. He sounds frustrated by it, but Isaac highly doubts it has anything to do with the unsteady fate of the parents.

Isaac watches Derek closely. He shows no outward reaction to the reference of Paige, but Isaac detects the smallest uptick in his heartbeat. Isaac, inhibitions still distorted from the emotionally charged events of the day, places a hand on Derek’s shoulder. Derek glares at him, but doesn’t shake him off.

“But then, how are we supposed to find it?” Lydia asks. She looks over at Isaac as if she expects him to jump in and help. If Isaac had anything to offer, he would.

Peter shrugs and gives her a look like, *I don’t know what to tell you*. Lydia heaves a sigh.

Isaac, feeling sympathy, says, “If you figure something out and need help... Just. You know. I – I’ll help.”

It's a pathetic offer, really, but Lydia looks grateful. She nods and makes for the door.

When the loft door closes, Derek snorts. "Your social skills really are the best of the best."

"Shut up," Isaac says, but there's a smile on his face.

—

The sun is just starting to set when Isaac gets the call.

"Allison?" he answers.

"Isaac," Allison says, skipping any preamble, "Deaton might have a way for us to find the nemeton, but we need your help. Lydia said you offered?"

Isaac looks over at Derek. He's spent the past couple of hours at Derek's side, watching as he slowly but surely regains his strength. Derek is already looking much better than he did before, but, still, Isaac is hesitant to leave. He must pause for a moment too long because Derek pointedly clears his throat. "Go," he mouths.

Isaac nods. Then, into the receiver, "Yeah, of course, I'll help."

"Meet us at the animal clinic," Allison says, cutting to the chase. She hangs up before Isaac can even voice his agreement.

Isaac slides his phone into his pocket, all the while inspecting Derek. He asks, "Are you sure you're okay with me leaving?"

"You have to find the nemeton," Derek says. It's not exactly a yes. When Isaac's skepticism doesn't fade, Derek adds, "If we save their parents, then Jennifer loses her leverage and we might have a chance against her."

Isaac nods, but, still, he doesn't want to say goodbye. Isaac glances down at his lap. Derek places a hand over Isaac's.

"I'll be fine," Derek says.

Isaac looks up at Derek. His eyes are sincere and his hand is warm over Isaac's. Derek gives a light squeeze, and then pulls his hand away.

"Go," Derek says.

Once more, Isaac's mind returns to the night Derek kicked him out. So much has changed since then. This moment is so different. Derek might be asking him to leave, but it's not to further his own agenda. It's for the good of others, regardless of how it might negatively impact Derek. It's selfless. Derek isn't being malicious. He's being kind and reassuring. He cares about Isaac, and he's proven it.

Isaac gives Derek a faint smile. "I'll try to be back soon. Don't do anything stupid."

—

Isaac half runs, half jogs to the animal clinic. He probably should have asked Derek for a ride, but Derek needs all the rest he can get. Isaac doesn't mind being late. It's worth it.

Isaac is the last of the group to arrive, and when he walks through the door, all heads swivel to face him.

"Isaac..." It's Scott.

Scott's body collides with Isaac's. Isaac grunts in surprise at the impact. It takes him a second to get with the program, but, once he does, he grins and hugs back. Isaac doesn't know why, but he wasn't expecting such a warm welcome. It doesn't make much sense, especially considering the last time everyone – bar Lydia – saw him, he was on his deathbed. Isaac just isn't used to people actively caring about him.

After a moment, Scott steps back, but he keeps his hands on Isaac's shoulders. His eyes roam over Isaac like he's trying to ensure that Isaac really is here, safe and well. "You're okay? What – What happened?"

Isaac looks between Scott and the group, realizing that now is the time to explain. He jumps right into the deep end. "Derek gave up being an alpha to save my life."

There's silence for a moment, and then Stiles squawks, "*What?*"

All eyes are on Isaac now, and so he reiterates, "Derek sacrificed being an alpha to save my life. He's a beta now."

"Wh – How?" Scott asks. His hands are still on Isaac's shoulders, but his grip has gone slack.

“He was taking my pain, and... and instead of stopping, he just kept going. Peter said alphas have that extra spark of power, and he used that – gave that up – to save me,” Isaac says. It’s a bit of a lackluster explanation, Isaac knows, but it’s the best he can do. He didn’t get all the details from Peter or Derek, didn’t care much at the time.

“That’s so...” Stiles trails off. “I – I mean obviously we’re glad you’re okay, it’s just... it sounds so out of character for Derek.”

Isaac nods. He understands. He knows Stiles doesn’t mean it to be cruel, and it isn’t. It’s true. It’s so unlike Derek’s usual ways. Isaac could hardly believe it at first. Honestly, he still doesn’t fully believe it.

“Look at all that Derek has lost, though. I would want to hang onto you too,” Scott says with a genuine smile and a squeeze to Isaac’s shoulder.

Isaac smiles back, and Scott finally releases his hold on him. Scott doesn’t go far though, staying close to Isaac’s side.

“So Derek’s a beta now? What is he going to do about Kali?” Lydia asks.

“I – I don’t know,” Isaac says. An unsettled quiet falls over the clinic. Isaac is met with the familiar feeling that everyone knows something he doesn’t. He looks around and asks, “What?”

Deaton cuts in, “I’m sorry, but we’ll fill you in later. We need to get a move on if we want to find your parents.”

Isaac is frustrated by the interruption, but he recognizes the need to prioritize, and lets it go. He pushes his curiosity aside, and focuses on their next mission.

“So what’s the plan?” Scott asks Deaton.

“Essentially, you, Allison, and Stiles need to be surrogate sacrifices for your parents,” Deaton says. Isaac knows Deaton can be trusted, it’s been proven time and time again, but Isaac still doesn’t particularly like him. It’s something about the way he speaks. He gives out only the bare minimum of information necessary. It sort of reminds Isaac of Peter.

“We die for them?” Scott asks.

“But he can bring us back,” Stiles says. He pauses, then adds, less sure, “You can – You can bring us back, right?”

“You remember the part where I said it was dangerous,” Deaton says ominously. “If it goes right, the three of you will be dead for a few seconds, but there’s something else you need to think about. This is a dangerous thing for more reasons than one. You’ll be giving power back to the nemeton, a place that hasn’t had that power for a long time. This kind of power is like a magnet. It attracts the supernatural, the kind of things that a family like the Argents,” Deaton gestures toward Allison, “could fill the pages of a bestiary with. It will draw them here, like a beacon.”

Well, that doesn’t sound terrifying at all.

“Doesn’t sound any worse than anything we’ve already seen,” Stiles says. Isaac, as he usually does in Stiles’ presence, has to suppress the urge to roll his eyes. Now he’s just testing fate.

“You’d be surprised at what you have yet to see,” Deaton says.

“Is that all?” Scott asks.

“No,” Deaton says. *Of course it isn’t.* “It will also have an effect on the three of you. You won’t be able to see it, but you’ll feel it every day, for the rest of your lives. It’ll be a kind of a darkness around your heart, and permanent, like a scar.”

“Like a tattoo,” Scott says, voice hushed with the realization.

As much as he might want to, Isaac knows it’s not his place to object. It’s not his parent’s life at stake, and, besides, Isaac is no expert in parent-child relationships.

Isaac has some memories of his mom, distant and hazy, but she died when he was too young to really know her. Isaac doesn’t even know how she died, talking about her was all but forbidden in his household. And as for Isaac’s dad, he might not have always abused him, he might be Isaac’s anchor, but they never had a relationship like this.

It’s almost ironic. Scott, Stiles, and Allison all lost a parent in one way or another, but that loss brought them closer to the one left behind. Isaac didn’t have that same experience. Losing his mother could have brought Isaac and his father together, but it didn’t. It pushed them apart.

So, Isaac, despite hating every word of this plan, says nothing.

“So how does this work?” Scott asks.

“I’m sure you remember Isaac’s ice bath,” Deaton says. Isaac wishes he could forget it. “Well, this is a bit more risky than that–” Isaac begs to differ “–but it’s the same idea. You’ll be submerged in the mixture of ice water, mistletoe, and your symbolic tokens. Then, we slow your heart rate down enough that you’re technically dead.”

Isaac’s ice bath was horrific, but his heart rate was only slowed to the point of being *nearly* dead. There’s a stark difference between nearly and technically.

Isaac hates this plan.

“We should get started,” Deaton says. “Scott, Isaac, help me with the ice.”

Despite his better judgement, Isaac follows the instructions. He grabs a bag of ice from the back of the room and tears it open. He pours the ice inside one of the three tubs. He empties the bag a bit too quickly, causing some of the water to splash upwards. It hits his hand and Isaac shivers. The memory of his own ice bath is lingering at the back of his mind. It had taken Isaac days to feel warm again, and that was with werewolf healing on his side. Stiles and Allison won’t have that same privilege.

Soon enough, the tubs are full of the ice and mistletoe mixture. Then, Deaton asks, “So, you each have a token, yes? What did you bring?”

Deaton addresses Stiles first. Stiles goes quiet, fiddling with the object in his hands. His voice is rough with emotion when he says, “Um. I got my dad’s badge. Jennifer kind of crushed it in her hand, so I tried hammering it out a bit... Still doesn’t look great. Um–”

“It doesn’t need to look good, if it has meaning,” Deaton reassures.

Isaac glances away from Stiles, feeling uncomfortable seeing him so vulnerable (it’s becoming a more and more common occurrence). When he does, he catches a glimpse of the object in Allison’s hand.

In his surprise, Isaac blurts out, “Is that an actual silver bullet?”

“My dad made it,” Allison says, holding up the bullet. “It’s kind of a ceremonial thing. When one of us finishes learning all the skills to be

a hunter, we forge a silver bullet as a testament to the code.” Allison closes her fist over it.

“Scott?” Deaton prompts.

Scott holds out the item in his hand. It’s a simple watch. “My dad got my mom this watch when she first got hired at the hospital. She used to say it was the only thing in their marriage that ever worked.”

Scott shares a wistful smile, looking down at the watch. If the watch isn’t broken already, it will be soon.

“Okay,” Deaton says, getting right down to business. “The three of you will get in. Each of us will hold you down until you’re essentially, well, dead.” Fantastic. “But it’s not just someone to hold you under. It needs to be someone who can pull you back, someone that has a strong connection to you, a kind of emotional tether.”

There’s a moment’s pause where the five of them share glances, sizing up their relationships. As usual, Isaac feels like he’s on the outside looking in, watching as movement starts to ripple through the group.

“Isaac,” Deaton cuts in. “You go with Stiles.”

Isaac goes still with shock. Isaac has only ever really felt like he had a genuine relationship with Scott, but then... then, Isaac remembers listening to the story of Derek and Paige. He remembers the attempt to prove the supernatural’s existence to the sheriff. He remembers the time in the ambulance. He remembers every small moment where Stiles made Isaac feel trusted and, more importantly, included.

Isaac and Stiles lock eyes. It’s like, in that moment, they’re both having the same realization. They’re both realizing how unintentionally bonded they’ve become. The pairing starts to make sense to Isaac.

Then, Deaton assigns the other groups, and they break off.

Isaac crosses the room, joining Stiles at the middle bath. In the moment of commotion, Stiles pats Isaac’s back, and says, “Hey, I’m glad you’re okay.”

Isaac smiles, bright and genuine. “Yeah. Yeah, me too.”

Stiles strips his hoodie off, crouching down next to the bath. “So you’ve done this before, yeah? Is it gonna be as bad as I think it is?”

“Worse,” Isaac says, breaking the tension.

Stiles snorts, “Right. Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

Isaac, starting to recognize the risk of what they’re about to do, says, “Um. I think you saved my life in that ambulance, so, uh. Thanks.”

Stiles’ eyes go wide. “You remember that?”

“Bits and pieces,” Isaac says with a shrug. He doesn’t tell Stiles exactly what he remembers. He wants to give them both plausible deniability, but he also needs Stiles to know that he does remember. He remembers the feeling of oxygen flooding his lungs, he remembers that first gasp of breath. “I – I’m pretty sure I stopped breathing for a few seconds, and you brought me back. So. I guess it’s time for me to return the favor?”

Stiles cracks a smile, “Yeah, you owe me.”

Isaac smiles back, and, just like that, the time has come.

A quiet tension fills the air as Allison, Stiles, and Scott stand before their baths. Stiles pauses. He looks back at Isaac. If ever there was a moment to test their trust, this is it. Any unsteadiness between them falls away as they make eye contact. Isaac meets Stiles’ insecurity with stable confidence. Isaac gives a small nod, and Stiles straightens. Stiles turns forward towards the bath, and with his dad’s badge clenched in his hand, slowly eases in.

Stiles huffs out shaky breaths and grunts as he goes, spurred into the cold by pure determination. As much as Isaac doesn’t want to watch, he forces himself to keep focus. Stiles sinks down to his chin, immediately shaking with the chill.

Isaac watches as a panting Stiles turns to look at Scott. He says, “By the way, uh, if I don’t make it back and you do, you should probably know something.” Stiles, despite the shivers racking his body, says with conviction, “Your dad’s back in town.”

Isaac briefly lets his gaze drift over to Scott. Isaac knew Scott’s dad was alive, but that was the extent of his knowledge. Isaac can’t see Scott’s face, but he can see the way his shoulders hunch. He can hear the way his breath comes a little bit more staggered. Sympathy blooms in Isaac’s chest, but there’s no time for it.

Deaton gives Isaac and Lydia a curt nod, signaling that the moment is

upon them. Isaac takes his jacket off and steps forward. He settles his hands on Stiles' shoulders. He pushes.

Stiles willingly slips under the surface. Once he's submerged, there's a brief moment where Stiles' survival instincts kick in. He struggles against Isaac's hands, but his body quickly goes still.

Time seems to pass in slow motion as the three surrogate sacrifices commence.

Then, Stiles' body goes limp and floats up to breach the surface. Isaac looks between Lydia and Deaton, and then lets go.

Lydia breaks the uneasy silence, "Now what?"

"We wait," Deaton says, moving to his feet. "We can't force them back, we just have to wait for them to regain consciousness on their own."

Isaac is so tired of waiting. He can't sit here and watch the three of them freeze halfway to death. He just can't do it. Isaac flexes his fingers, then curls them into fists, fighting the urge to pace.

Isaac feels eyes on him. He turns to his right, seeing Lydia watching him. He meets her gaze. For as much grief as Isaac had given Lydia during the kanima dilemma, she has always been kind to him, if not a little indifferent. Honestly, Isaac doesn't mind the indifference. Lydia spares him a small smile.

"Come on," she says, gesturing towards the floor by the wall. "Let's sit. I'll fill you in on what you missed."

As much as Isaac doesn't want to sit still, he appreciates her pragmatic nature, so he follows. He leans back against the wall and she joins him.

"So?" Isaac asks.

"Kali might be after Derek, but Deucalion isn't," Lydia says vaguely.

"What do you mean?" Isaac's eyebrows furrow. "Who is he after?"

"Scott," Lydia says. Isaac tilts his head, not following.

Deaton, still lingering in the room, interjects, "The belief is that Scott is something called a true alpha. An alpha who doesn't have to steal power, but who earns it, rising through the ranks by the strength of

his own convictions.”

“That – That’s a thing?” Isaac asks, looking back and forth between Lydia and Deaton.

Deaton nods, “It’s rare. Something that only happens every few centuries, but it does happen. The moment I realized Scott had been turned, I recognized the quality in him... He’s special. I know it, *you* know it, and so does Deucalion.”

Isaac suddenly remembers what Peter had said to him back at the loft. “Is Scott – Did he join them?”

“Scott is under the impression that we can’t beat Jennifer and save their parents without the help of the alphas, so, yes. For the time being, Scott has joined them,” Deaton says.

Isaac shakes his head. He knows how important Scott’s mom is to him, but he refuses to believe teaming up with the alphas is the only way to save her. There must be another way.

Isaac looks to Lydia. She appears as torn as he feels. Rather than sharing her opinion on the matter, Lydia changes the subject, “Isaac... Derek didn’t look so good when I saw him at the loft. How is he going to face Kali? He barely survived fighting her as an alpha.”

“I–” Isaac pauses, caught off guard by the question and the sudden influx of worry in his system. “I don’t – I should check on him.”

Lydia nods. Isaac pulls his phone from his pocket and dials Derek’s number.

“Isaac? What’s wrong?” Derek answers.

Isaac takes a moment to explain their current situation, telling Derek that he was just calling to check in. Isaac can practically feel Derek’s sharp glare through the phone; although, now, Isaac doesn’t feel as chastened as he once would have. There’s been a shift in their relationship, almost like the playing field has been leveled, seeing them as equals.

Of course, part of it is because of the instinctual change in hierarchy caused by Derek’s fall to beta status. But, more than that, it’s because of the strengthened trust between them. Derek let Isaac in, he let Isaac see him vulnerable. It’s a powerful thing.

"I'm fine." Derek says adamantly.

"Really?" Isaac asks.

"Yes," Derek huffs. Isaac keeps quiet. Silence settles between them as they attempt to wait each other out. Surprisingly, Derek is the first to crack. *"Or I will be. It – I'm regaining strength, I just need time."*

"The full moon is tonight, Derek," Isaac says. Time isn't a luxury they have right now.

"Yes, but it's not just a full moon. It's a lunar eclipse. We'll all be powerless," Derek argues. He makes a good point, but they both know it won't stop Kali. The eclipse won't last long, and Kali is a werewolf out for revenge. It's dangerous. The odds are stacked high against Derek.

Isaac can't find it within himself to dash Derek's confidence, so, instead, he says, "I have to stay and wait here, but just..."

"If I need help... you'll help?" Derek mocks.

Isaac groans. "Shut. Up."

Derek laughs. It sends a jolt of surprise through Isaac. The laughter is stilted and quiet, but it's still the most open Isaac has ever heard it before. Isaac tries, but he can't fight his own grin. There's a hint of humor in his voice when he says, "Just go rest."

Isaac hangs up the phone to find Lydia and Deaton examining him closely.

"What?" he asks, genuinely confused.

Lydia smacks her lips, "Nothing."

"I haven't seen Derek care about anyone in a long time," Deaton says, contemplative.

Isaac frowns. He doesn't like being perceived like this. Isaac has never been a good liar, and, as much as he tries, masking his emotions just isn't his strong suit. Fortunately, neither Deaton nor Lydia press the subject further.

Instead, Lydia just says, "We're going to be here a while, aren't we?"

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: the idea of Derek sacrificing being an alpha to save Isaac is what inspired this entire fic

Lunar Ellipse

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 12

Word count: 5,557

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The hours tick by. After one, maybe two, they order food. Another three hours pass by, and they start trying to sleep in shifts. Isaac can't take it. He can't stand sitting here, waiting, watching his friends turn blue. After eight hours, Isaac migrates out into the front room. He sits in one of the uncomfortable waiting room chairs, checking on Derek every couple of hours. And waiting. So much waiting.

That's where Isaac is when he hears the splash of water and gasps of breath. Isaac is immediately on his feet, darting back into the room.

Scott is emerging from the water, heaving for air, and saying, "I saw it! I know where it is!"

"We passed it," Stiles says, climbing out of the tub. "There's – There's a stump, this huge tree. Well, it's not huge anymore. It was cut down, but it's still big, though, very big."

"It was the night we were looking for the body," Scott says in a rush.

"Yeah, the same night you were bit by Peter," Stiles agrees.

"I was there too, in the car with my mother," Allison adds. "We almost hit someone."

"It was me," Scott says, turning to look at Allison. "You almost hit me."

Allison lets out a soft noise of surprise.

"We can find it," Scott says, determined.

Isaac is transported back to this same room, one month ago. The circumstances are scarily similar, except, this time, the roles are reversed. This time, it's not Isaac, dripping wet and freezing, rambling

about a hidden location without knowing the direness of the situation. This time, it's Scott, Stiles, and Allison.

Isaac wonders which revelation is worse: Erica's death or the fact that the full moon is only a few hours away. Erica's death should be worse, but none of them had wanted to believe it, so they didn't. A death without witnesses can be denied, but the passage of time cannot.

When Scott's words are met only with silence, the three of them start to notice the downtrodden atmosphere. Isaac and Deaton share a glance.

"What?" Allison asks.

"You guys were out a long time," Isaac says.

"How long is a long time?" Stiles asks, any trace of motivation is gone from his voice, replaced with frustration and dread.

"Sixteen hours," Deaton says.

Stiles reels back, Allison gapes, and Scott says incredulously, "We've been in the water for sixteen hours?"

"And the moon rises in less than four," Deaton confirms.

Isaac watches as the three turn crestfallen. Isaac wants to comfort them, but he has no idea how. Instead, Isaac grabs a towel and tosses it to Stiles. Deaton and Lydia follow suit, getting towels for Scott and Allison. Quiet falls over the group as they try to dry off and get warm.

Isaac settles next to Allison, leaning against her bath. Sixteen hours is a long time to wait. Isaac had a long time to think about this. So, hushed, Isaac whispers, "I'm sorry I let you go after your dad alone."

Allison looks over at him. Her hair is still dripping wet and her lips are tinted blue. She looks at him like she's looking through him, not quite accusatory, but definitely examining. She whispers back, "It was my decision. Anyway, you wouldn't have been much help if you collapsed in the middle of it." She pauses, then softens, "But I'm glad you're okay."

Isaac nods. He still doesn't feel great about the decision, but he knows he didn't really have any other choice. Besides, she's right. The poison would have set in and he would have only gotten in the way.

After a long moment of silence, Scott says, "I have to go back to Deucalion. I have to tell him we know how to find the nemeton."

"No, dude, you are not going back with them," Stiles says, voice firm and almost irritated.

"I made a deal with Deucalion," Scott says.

"Does anyone else think that sounds a lot like a deal with the devil?" Stiles asks. He has a point. Scott is so morally correct. Most of the time, it's an admiral quality, but, sometimes, it becomes a hindrance. Scott is so focused on being good and doing right by others that he puts himself in harm's way. Isaac admires Scott's firm morals, but, with so much at stake, now is the time to compromise.

"Why does it matter, anyway?" Isaac asks. Scott must have another reason for wanting to rejoin Deucalion. Even Scott wouldn't risk everything just to appease his conscience.

"Because I still don't think we can beat Jennifer without their help," Scott says, looking over at Isaac. Isaac knows Scott is being genuine, knows he really does believe it's true, but Isaac still has his doubts.

"He trusts you more than anyone. Tell him he's wrong," Allison says, addressing Deaton.

"I'm not so sure he is," Deaton says. That surprises Isaac. "Circumstances like this sometimes require that you align yourself with people you'd normally consider enemies."

"So we're going to trust him, the guy who calls himself Death, Destroyer of Worlds? We're gonna trust that guy?" Isaac asks, still unconvinced.

"I wouldn't trust him, no," Deaton says, "but you could use him to your advantage." Deaton pivots his attention back towards Scott. "Deucalion may be the enemy, but he could also be the bait."

There's a pause as the implications of the statement sink in. However, before anything more can be said, the silence is interrupted by the sound of the front door opening. They all turn to face the noise. There's another clatter. Deaton and Scott move to investigate.

"I'm looking for Lydia," the voice carries into the backroom. Instantly, Isaac recognizes it as one of the twins. He has to bite back a growl, forcing it down his throat.

“What do you want?” Lydia asks, meeting Scott and Deaton at the front of the clinic.

“I need your help,” the twin says. Isaac listens closely, but he can't recognize which twin it is. However, if he's here for Lydia, the signs would point towards Aiden. It doesn't bode well for them.

Stiles, feeling threatened, joins the others. “With what?”

“Stopping my brother and Kali...” the twin pauses, “from killing Derek.”

That makes Isaac sit up straight. Fear starts to simmer in his stomach, but before it can take over, the group returns to the back of the clinic.

“Ethan, is it?” Deaton asks.

The twin – Ethan, apparently – nods. “Look, I know you don't trust me, but I'm on your side. Kali and Aiden are going to Derek's loft any moment now, and I want to stop them.”

“You're right, we don't trust you,” Scott says, pinning Ethan down with the strength of his gaze. “But... if we want to save Derek from Kali and Aiden, we could use your help.”

“We don't have a lot of time here, Scott,” Stiles says. “I think we might have to split up.”

“Stiles is right,” Deaton says. “The moon is already starting to rise, and the nemeton is going to be hard to find. You'll have to track your parents by scent.”

Isaac already knows how the groups are going to shake out. He just doesn't know where he'll end up. It depends on where he's needed most. Isaac has been itching to rejoin Derek since he set foot inside the animal clinic, but he also doesn't want to abandon Scott in his greatest moment of need.

“Okay, so we split up,” Scott says, matter-of-fact and simple. “Lydia, you'll go with Ethan to warn Derek. Stiles, Allison, and I will go get clothes from our parents.” Scott pauses. “Isaac?”

Isaac freezes for a moment. He sort of hoped that someone else would jump in and make the decision for him. The whole group turns their attention towards him. Isaac stutters. “Uh, I should... I should go see Derek.”

Isaac feels the urge to explain himself – something about not trusting Peter and Ethan or owing it to Derek – but he swallows it down. Scott doesn't look disappointed or angry or anything at all. He just nods and says, "Okay."

With their marching orders set, they break off.

Isaac, Ethan, and Lydia make it to the loft in record time. There's a brief moment where Derek sees Isaac and almost smiles, but it's broken when Ethan comes into view. Derek bristles. "What are you doing here?"

"He's here to help," Lydia says. She doesn't sound as sure of herself as she intends to, but, still, she stands her ground.

Derek huffs and lets them in.

Derek leads them into the loft where Peter is already waiting for them. Isaac follows behind Derek, not hovering, but staying close. Derek gives Isaac a pointed look, but Isaac doesn't falter. He takes his place by Derek's side and doesn't budge.

Derek folds his arms over his chest, stares Ethan down, and gestures for him to get on with it.

"We know about the lunar eclipse," Ethan starts, like a warning. "So don't think Kali's going to sit around waiting for it to level the playing field. She's coming, and my brother's coming with her."

"Good enough for me," Peter says. "Derek?"

"You want me to run?" Derek questions. It's already so obvious how he feels about the idea. It's like it's beneath him.

"No... I want you to stay and get slaughtered by an alpha with a psychotic foot fetish," Peter muses, almost taunting. "Of course, I want you to run! Sprint, gallop, leap your way the hell out of this town."

Isaac looks between Peter and Derek. Peter is never going to sway Derek.

"If you want to fight and die for something, that's fine with me, but do it for something meaningful," Isaac says. Isaac knows Derek has no interest in backing away from this fight. He also knows he's probably

the only person who can convince him it's the right thing to do.

"How do you know I'm gonna lose?" Derek asks. He's purposely avoiding eye contact with Isaac now.

"We don't," Peter says. "But I'll bet she has an idea." Peter looks over at Lydia. "Don't you, Lydia?"

Lydia, for her part, doesn't look surprised, but she does look a little scared. She says, "I don't know anything."

"But you feel something," Peter approaches her. "Don't you?"

"What do you feel?" Derek asks.

"I feel like..." Lydia pauses. The whole room holds its breath. They all seem to lean in towards Lydia, awaiting her diagnosis. "I'm standing in a graveyard."

Isaac's eyes flit to Derek. Isaac still doesn't fully understand what Lydia's gift is, but, in the sixteen hours they were waiting together, she had the opportunity to explain some of it to him. Lydia's words are as good as a death sentence. It's enough for Derek to cave.

"Okay, I'll go," he says. He's certainly not happy about it, but Isaac doesn't care. He just wants Derek to make it out of this alive.

"Great," Peter says, usual condescending cheer in place. "Let's get a move on."

Isaac watches as Derek grabs a duffel bag and starts piling clothes inside. It's so uncharacteristic of Derek to be giving up. Isaac almost feels discouraged by it.

"You two shouldn't stick around either," Ethan says, gesturing to Peter and Isaac. "Kali and Aiden are unlikely to attack me or Lydia, but you're Derek's pack. They would happily kill you instead."

"Excellent," Isaac mutters. He says it under his breath, but none of that matters with three other werewolves in the room. Derek levels Isaac with a look, but Isaac just raises his eyebrows, unfazed.

"Fine by me," Peter says, "But I'm taking my own car."

Once Derek has gathered his things, which doesn't take long at all, the three of them are ready to go. Before they make their exit, Isaac pauses. He approaches Lydia, getting close enough to have some

semblance of privacy.

“Are you sure we can trust him?” Isaac asks, feeling nervous about leaving Lydia alone with Ethan.

“Yeah, yes, I’ll be fine. We’re just going to stall them,” Lydia says, nodding. She doesn’t sound very confident, but her heart rate doesn’t change.

It’s the best Isaac is going to get, so he mimics her nod, “Okay.”

Isaac is certain everyone else in the room just heard their exchange, but he pretends they didn’t. He brushes past them, heading towards the door. He gives Lydia one last look, and says, “Good luck.”

Isaac follows Derek out to his car, taking up his spot in the passenger seat. There, Peter leans down to address Derek. “Don’t call until you’re at least a hundred miles away,” Peter says. He pauses. Neither he nor Derek say anything. Then, Peter barks, “Go!”

They only make it a mile down the road before Derek says, “Call Scott.”

Isaac flusters. “What? Why?”

“Because you’ll be more help to him than me. Come on. Call him. I’ll drop you off, *then* I’ll skip town,” Derek says.

Isaac doesn’t like the thought of leaving Derek alone, but he’s right. Scott is about to go up against the greatest danger Beacon Hills has ever seen. With more lives at risk than ever before, Scott is going to need all the help he can get, including Isaac’s.

So, Isaac dials. Scott picks up after the third ring.

“Isaac?”

“Where are you? I’m coming to help,” Isaac says. He doesn’t bother to explain, they don’t have time.

“*Uh – we’re headed to the preserve,*” Scott says, sounding confused.

“I’ll meet you there,” Isaac says. He hangs up before Scott can respond. Then, despite the existence of werewolf super-hearing, he informs Derek, “The preserve.”

Derek nods and takes the next right turn.

The car falls into silence. Isaac looks at Derek. He looks much better than earlier, but his skin is pale and there's a tiredness to his expression. Isaac doesn't like it. He cracks, "Are you – Are you feeling better?"

Derek spares Isaac a quick glance, but mostly keeps his eyes on the road. "Isaac, I've told you, I will be fine. I'm not a hundred percent yet, but I'm getting there."

"Okay. Good. You... You look better. I just—" Isaac cuts himself off.

"You just?" Derek asks.

"I don't want it to be a waste, is all," Isaac says, putting voice to his concerns.

"As long as you don't go and get yourself killed in the next twelve hours, it won't be a waste," Derek says. "I knew what I was risking. My life, for yours."

Isaac feels tears prick in his eyes.

"Isaac, do not cry right now," Derek says. His voice lacks its usual bite. Instead, it comes out almost reassuring. It's not the right tone for this situation. This isn't the right time to be talking about any of this, but... Isaac doesn't know what's going to happen tonight. He doesn't know when they'll see each other again.

In the spirit of last chances, Isaac says something he should have said a long time ago, "Boyd and Erica weren't your fault."

Derek doesn't say anything, but Isaac wasn't expecting him to. Isaac powers through the silence.

"Derek, I... I care about you." It's not exactly what Isaac means to say, but it's the best he can do right now.

The car swerves a little, and Isaac lets out a small, wet laugh. Derek's voice is quiet when he says, "I care about you too."

Isaac smiles.

—

Derek and Isaac pull up at the preserve right behind Scott and Allison. Before Isaac can step out of the car, Derek puts a hand on his shoulder. "Be careful, yeah?"

“Yeah,” Isaac says. He flashes Derek a smile, and steps out of the car. Before closing the door, he leans down and says, “Drive like hell.”

Derek reverses out of the path and Isaac runs up to join Scott and Allison. As soon as they’re in earshot, Isaac says, “We convinced Derek to run. What’s the plan here?”

“We’re going to meet up with the alphas,” Scott says. “We got held up by my dad, so we still have no idea where the nemeton is. We need their help.”

Allison cuts in, looking between her phone and Scott, “I still haven’t gotten anything from Stiles – you?”

Scott shakes his head, looking worried. “I don’t get it.”

“All right,” Allison says. “Well, we can’t wait for him. Come on.”

Allison takes off into the preserve. Scott pulls his phone out, checking one last time. With no messages from Stiles and no sign of him on the road, they have no choice but to follow Allison.

Scott leads the way, dipping into the woods. They run up a steep hill, coming to a stop at the overlook. The town of Beacon Hills spreads out before them, lit up by house lights and the full moon hanging overhead. Isaac can feel its pull, but he’s still in control.

“Cutting it a little close, aren’t we, Scott?” Deucalion asks, appearing out of the shadows. Despite him temporarily being on their side, Isaac still finds Deucalion daunting.

“We got a little delayed,” Scott says. “Where are the others?”

“Occupying themselves with other pursuits,” Deucalion says vaguely.

“So it’s just you and me against her?” Scott questions. He doesn’t sound as dismayed by the information as he should.

“I think you’ll be surprised what a good team we make,” Deucalion says. His words are carefully chosen, coming out almost threatening. Isaac doesn’t trust him in the slightest.

“Okay, get Stiles,” Scott turns to Isaac, voice quiet, “and then get to the root cellar, okay? We’ll keep Jennifer away long enough for you to get them out of there.”

“How are you gonna do that?” Isaac asks.

"I have a plan," Scott says. He makes deliberate eye contact with Isaac, like he's willing Isaac to trust him. Isaac does. He trusts Scott with his life, but Jennifer is the biggest threat they've ever faced. She nearly killed Isaac, and they still don't even know *how* she managed to poison him. If Deucalion is daunting, then Jennifer is terrifying.

Still, Isaac nods, giving Scott his assent.

Isaac turns to Allison. They share a brief moment of eye contact, and then, with one last glance at Scott, they branch off into the preserve.

Once they're out of hearing range, Isaac asks, "Still no word from Stiles?"

"No," Allison says, checking her phone. "Nothing."

"Let's go back to the entrance," Isaac says. It's their best bet. It's where Stiles is most likely to be waiting, and, even if he isn't, it's a good place to regroup.

Allison easily agrees and they pick up the pace. They rush towards the gate, hoping to find Stiles or, at the very least, his Jeep.

Unfortunately, all that's waiting for them is Allison's car and Scott's motorcycle. Allison and Isaac share a worried look.

"He could be anywhere," Isaac says, trying to focus on logic rather than the burning panic in his lungs. "We should focus on finding the nemeton, maybe Stiles is already there."

Allison nods, though she looks skeptical. She moves to unlock her car, grabbing a worn t-shirt from the passenger seat. She holds it up to Isaac, "Here. It's my dad's. Get a lock on his scent."

Isaac takes a whiff of the shirt. It doesn't smell bad (it's definitely better than the shoe he once used to track Stiles). Mostly it just smells like a little bit of sweat, gunpowder, and something else Isaac can't quite identify.

Isaac solidifies the scent in his mind, committing it to memory. Since being turned, Isaac can now recall scents like he can songs on the radio. It's a blessing and a curse.

"Do you think you know where it is?" Isaac asks, tossing the shirt back to Allison.

“Roughly,” she says, putting the shirt back in the car. With a slam of the door, she says, “Follow me.”

They dart off into the woods again, sprinting as fast as they can. They jump over stray roots and duck under low hanging branches. They run.

They run until, eventually, Allison slows down, falling into a fast paced walk. She doesn’t say anything, but Isaac follows her lead.

A storm has been brewing all day, and it’s finally starting to break. There’s no rain, but the wind is gradually picking up speed. With every second that passes, the storm grows stronger. The stronger the storm gets, the lower their chances of finding the nemeton become. With every gust of wind, their visibility decreases and Isaac’s ability to track a scent diminishes.

The storm is getting loud, enough so that Isaac has to raise his voice to ask, “Are you sure we’re going in the right direction?”

“I know we’re near it,” Allison says, stomping ahead with purpose. “You think you can pick up a scent?”

“I’m trying, but I ca–” Isaac’s voice cuts off as the sound reaches his ears. He comes to an abrupt halt, listening closely.

“I hear something,” he says. The noise is faint, but it’s unmistakable. The pulsing, high pitched ringing could only be one thing. “It’s an – it’s an emitter. It’s one of your dad’s.”

“Are you sure?” Allison asks.

“Has to be,” Isaac says, full of certainty. He starts running, shouting over his shoulder, “Come on!”

Isaac takes up the lead, using the sound to guide him. It’s difficult to hear over the raging storm, but Isaac has a lock on it now. He runs towards the source of the ringing, leading them around a bend. There, in a small clearing, is a ginormous tree stump. It’s even bigger than Isaac could have imagined.

Allison runs right up to it, but Isaac hangs back. He surveys the area, and quickly notices a hatch just beyond the stump. He calls out, “Allison!”

They race over to the cellar doors, fighting against the wind to keep

even footing. Luckily, there's no lock, so Isaac and Allison easily get the doors open, running down the steps into the cellar.

Allison heads straight towards her dad, while Isaac – out of chivalry or favoritism, he doesn't know – goes to Melissa. Isaac immediately starts work on undoing the knots binding Melissa's ankles.

"Where's Stiles? Where's my son?" the sheriff yells over the storm.

"And Scott?" Melissa asks.

"They're coming, all right?" Isaac reassures. "They're on their way to help."

"Okay," Melissa breathes.

Right then, there's a loud rumbling. The ancient cellar stairs start to creak and cry as dirt pours inside. Isaac realizes with a jolt of fear that the cellar is starting to collapse in on them. Immediately, Isaac switches into double time.

Isaac rips through the knots around Melissa's wrists, uncaring for the rope burn that scores his skin. It heals almost as quickly as it appears, anyway. With her wrists untied, Melissa is able to start untying some of her other binds, accelerating the process.

Between Isaac and Allison, they're able to get all the knots untied in what is probably record breaking speed. All the while, the cellar is rapidly crumbling. Dirt is coming in all around them, steadily falling like the rain above the surface.

"Hurry!" Isaac shouts as Stilinski and Melissa pull themselves free of the remaining rope.

Out of nowhere, one of the shelves lining the cellar walls flies forward, nearly crushing Melissa. Isaac yanks her out of the way just in time. The shelf splinters into pieces, each flying out around the room and causing even more destruction. It's like a domino effect. The first shelf goes, then one of the wood pillars, then another shelf.

Isaac uses his body as a human shield for Stilinski and Melissa, taking the brunt of the blows. The sheriff just nearly misses getting hit by a piece of debris, and yells, "Come on! Let's get out of here!"

Stilinski already has a tight hold on Melissa, so Isaac grabs his arm, pulling both of them towards the stairs. Argent and Allison are just

ahead of them about to reach the exit. They're all so close to freedom, but then, the staircase collapses.

The bottom steps shatter and crumble, and, without their support, the top steps follow. The top section falls into the cellar, crashing into the skeleton of the bottom steps, shattering them further. The stairs seem to take forever to fully collapse, piece after piece piling in. Then, at last, the last section of stairs tips forward, belly flopping into the room.

It takes a second for the shock to fade and the dust to settle, but when it does, Argent gestures Isaac forward. They step carefully, cautious so as not to set off another cave-in. Argent creeps toward where the cellar door once was while Isaac searches for an alternative exit or any signs of help.

"It's blocked," Argent declares. He turns to Isaac. "What do you see? Anything?"

Isaac shakes his head. There's cracks in the pile up, but there's nothing out there. Just dirt and rubble. They're trapped. This would be a nightmare for anyone, but Isaac can't even ride alone in an elevator for fear of small spaces. He can already feel the panic sliding up his spine.

All at once, the destruction recommences. The sound of cracking wood and crumbling rock fills the small space, followed by Argent's shout of, "Look out!"

Isaac moves as quickly as he can, but his height and the lack of warning get the better of him. Even his werewolf agility can't combat it all. A piece of concrete gives way, slamming into him. The impact knocks Isaac to the ground, but the ceiling is still coming down.

Distantly, Isaac hears Allison call out his name, but he's too stunned to move.

Isaac would have been completely crushed if it weren't for Sheriff Stilinski. He grabs Isaac by the jacket and heaves him out of the way. They both crash to the ground, avoiding the falling slab of concrete by inches.

Isaac only has a brief moment to catch his breath and reorient himself before he looks up to see the support beams splintering. Isaac faintly registers the sound of the sheriff telling Melissa to run, but he blocks it all out. Isaac focuses on one thing and one thing only: keep them

alive.

Isaac gets up and starts fighting for his life. He uses both hands to push up against the collapsing ceiling. The weight is indescribable. The force of nature is bearing down on Isaac, but he refuses to give up.

It's the one time in his life where Isaac has actually felt *grateful* for his fear of small spaces. He lets the panic flood his body, and then he weaponizes it.

He hunkers down, ready to hold out as long as he can. Isaac's eyes glow yellow as he steels himself against great odds.

Isaac allows the full moon to siphon power into his body. He uses it to fuel himself forward, pushing past any and all limits. Isaac keeps holding. Even when he starts to think he can't do it anymore, he just keeps going.

Isaac's body is covered in sweat and aching all over. He grunts out, "Is it me or is this place getting smaller?"

At that same moment, Isaac makes brief eye contact with Melissa. It gives him an extra boost of energy. The power flows through his body. Isaac has to get her out of here. He can't let Scott bury his mom. Besides, Melissa has done so much for Isaac. He can't let her die.

They've come too far for it to end here. They're going to make it out of here alive. Isaac is going to make sure of it.

Isaac feels it when the lunar eclipse hits. It's like all the strength just disappears from his body. There's no warning, it's not a gradual thing, he just sags. The ceiling falls onto his shoulders, nearly crushing him.

Fortunately, the other four people in the cellar rush in to help him. They all crowd under the ceiling, working together to keep it up. Isaac thinks if he can just get through the eclipse, then they might be able to make it through this alive.

When Isaac feels his resolve start to crumble, he remembers the words Derek spoke to him earlier that evening: *as long as you don't go and get yourself killed in the next twelve hours, it won't be a waste*. Isaac lets the words fill him up. Any drop of strength left in his body rises to the surface. Isaac holds on. For Derek. He won't let it go to waste.

The eclipse is only fifteen minutes total, but each passing second feels

like hours to Isaac. Despite his determination and the intensity of his motivation, his body is giving out. "I can't do it," Isaac bites out. "I can't hold it, I can't hold it."

"It's too much! It's too heavy!" Allison groans.

The ceiling creaks, getting closer and closer to the ground. Everyone holds tight, but hope is dwindling. Isaac grunts and groans, pouring every ounce of himself into keeping the weight off of them. Then, out of nowhere, the ceaseless pressure stops.

Stiles is kneeling in front of them. His metal bat is wedged between the floor and the ceiling, putting a stop to the collapse.

"I always said aluminum was better than wood," Sheriff Stilinski says. Stiles rushes forward to hug him.

It's a touching scene, but Isaac can't help but notice that the ground is still falling all around them. The bat is keeping things at bay, but Isaac can't imagine it will hold for long.

Steadily, the light in the sunken cellar starts to turn from orangey-red to the night sky's usual bright, cool-toned white. Isaac is tapped out and exhausted, but he still feels the extra kick of energy from the full moon's return. Isaac flicks his fingers out and his claws appear.

"The eclipse..." Isaac breathes.

The storm is still raging around them, but Isaac feels his hope returning. If the bat doesn't hold, Isaac has a little more power to give and, now, Stiles has joined the mix. They won't be completely defenseless. Isaac holds onto the thought like a life vest. He sits with it and he waits, what he's waiting for – better or worse – Isaac doesn't know. Nonetheless, he waits.

Then, suddenly, there's a shift in the air. Everything goes still. The wind falls away and the storm goes quiet.

"Is it over?" Allison asks, looking around.

When no destruction immediately occurs, they take that as a yes. Relieved laughter fills the cellar as the catastrophe comes to an end.

They don't have to wait long for the call. Stiles answers, "Scott?"

Isaac listens in, not wanting to miss a beat. "*Hey, are you okay?*"

“Yeah, we’re okay. We’re all okay,” Stiles laughs in disbelief. “How about you, you okay?”

There’s movement on the other end, then, “*Sort of.*”

Despite the ambiguous nature, Isaac feels relief at the sentiment. Sort of is much better than not at all.

“You think you can come get us?” Stiles asks.

“*Yeah, of course.*”

“Great, okay. Um, uh, bring a ladder,” Stiles says. Isaac can’t help but laugh. That’s part of Stiles’ charm. Even in the darkest hours, he still makes people smile.

When Scott shows up, he’s not alone. Derek stands at the other end of the ladder waiting for Isaac. A different version of Isaac, one who didn’t just have two near death experiences in less than forty-eight hours, would have held back, but this Isaac doesn’t. This Isaac immediately hugs Derek.

Derek makes a sound of surprise, but he doesn’t protest. In fact, he gratefully hugs Isaac back.

“I thought I told you to run,” Isaac whispers.

Derek gives a small laugh. “Couldn’t leave you.”

Isaac breaks the hug. He looks out around him. Standing in the middle of the woods, all are reuniting and rejoicing in their victory. It’s a nice scene. Isaac embeds it in his memory. He needs more happy ones, anyhow.

Isaac doesn’t have to wait for a chance to approach Scott. Scott comes to him, “Hey, Allison tells me you saved all their lives.”

“I did my best,” Isaac says. It’s a lame thing to say, but Scott smiles. Isaac considers dragging it out, but instead he just bites the bullet, “So you’re an alpha now, huh?”

Scott gapes.

“I don’t know how I know. Wolf senses, I guess.” Isaac says with a shrug.

Scott laughs. “Right.”

“But how did it happen?” Isaac asks curiously. They all knew Scott had the potential to be a true alpha, but they couldn’t know for certain it was going to happen. Isaac isn’t necessarily surprised. Scott’s special, they all know that too.

“I broke through a ring of mountain ash,” Scott says. He sounds sort of sheepish. It’s charming in an almost infuriating way.

“I thought that was supposed to be impossible,” Isaac says in awe.

“Yeah and six months ago you didn’t know werewolves existed,” Scott says, voice light and teasing.

Isaac smiles. It’s true. His life has changed so much in so little time. It’s strange, trying to reconcile that he’s still the same person he was half a year ago. Everything feels different now. Isaac can’t say he minds.

Chapter End Notes

And that’s the end of season 3A! I’m gonna take a short break before I start posting the next season. My guess is the next update will be on January 18th. Thanks for your patience! I hope everyone is enjoying the story so far!

Anchors

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 13

Word count: 5,935

“Wait you’re – you’re leaving?” Isaac asks. He feels betrayed. Isaac told Derek to run, and he didn’t. He said he couldn’t leave Isaac behind, and, now, here he is doing exactly that.

Derek is sitting next to Isaac on the loft couch with a duffel bag on his lap. He at least has the decency to look apologetic.

“I promise I’ll be back I just – there’s something I have to do,” Derek says.

“What is it?” Isaac asks. Isaac doesn’t want Derek to leave. When people leave they don’t come back. First Camden, then Erica, and now Derek. Isaac can’t believe that after everything they’ve been through, Derek is leaving. Just like that.

“I have to go get something. Listen, Isaac,” Derek pointedly locks eyes with him. “I wouldn’t be leaving if it wasn’t important. Do you trust me?”

There’s no hesitation this time. “Yes.”

“Then trust that I will come back,” Derek says.

Isaac hates this, but he doesn’t fight it. He can tell this is important to Derek. Derek has proven that he cares about Isaac, and, now, Isaac has to prove that he trusts him. Isaac nods, “Yeah, okay.”

Derek stands and Isaac follows. At the door, Derek doesn’t hug Isaac. Isaac’s glad for it. Instead, Derek places a hand on Isaac’s shoulder, squeezes, and says, “I’ll only be a week or so.”

Isaac forces thoughts of Cam from his brain and nods. “See you in a week.”

—

It’s been three weeks and Derek still isn’t back. After the first few

days, Derek stopped calling or answering his texts. Isaac is trying not to think about it. He spends his days distracting himself.

Since helping save her and her dad's life, Isaac has gotten closer with Allison. She's kind to him, but not in a pitying way. She still gives him a hard time and Isaac is still his usual brusque self, but it's different now. Now, they're friends and the snarky comments are laced with casual affection. The closer they get, the more obvious their similarities become. It's nice having Allison on his side.

In addition to his budding friendship with Allison, Isaac still has Scott to lean on. Once, Scott let Isaac tag along to the animal clinic. That was Isaac's favorite day. Scott had to work, of course, but he let Isaac play with and comfort the sick dogs. The cats, Scott says, are off limits for the time being. Something about age old rivalry.

Stiles and Isaac are closer now too. Although they still don't really spend time together one-on-one, they have an unspoken bond. They saved each other's lives. If anything is going to spark an unexpected friendship, it's that.

Now that the supernatural threats of Beacon Hills have, at least momentarily, mellowed, things are different. *Good* different.

Isaac is still staying at the McCall house. Melissa works long hours, but when she's home, she always greets Isaac with one of those warm McCall smiles. That smile must come from Melissa's side of the family because Agent McCall has never smiled at Isaac like that. Most of the time, he doesn't even look at Isaac. Isaac doesn't mind being ignored. Usually, when Agent McCall is in the house, Isaac hides away in the guest room to avoid the tension.

Still, Isaac can tell that the sacrifice has had an effect on Scott, Stiles, and Allison. None of them ever talk about it, and Isaac doesn't ask, but they seem more subdued now. The need for a good distraction seems to be making its way through the whole group. Luckily, they're going back to school today, which is as good a distraction as any. Or, at least, they should be going back to school. Isaac should check on Scott.

Isaac is about to knock on the door of Scott's bedroom when it swings open. Isaac says, "Hey."

"Oh, hey." Scott falters back a step, caught off guard by Isaac's presence, which is weird. He should have heard Isaac coming. Isaac doesn't give it much thought. Scott has been like this the past few

weeks. Stuck in his head, almost. He's preoccupied. They all are.

"Um, are you – are you going to school?" Isaac asks.

"Yeah," Scott says.

"Okay, me too," Isaac says, easily.

"Good," Scott says.

It's awkward and Isaac hates it. He should leave and let the conversation drop, but he doesn't. Instead, he asks, "Um. Can I ask you a question?"

Scott tilts his head, "Okay."

"Uh. Have you – Have you heard from Derek?" Isaac asks. His voice sounds nervous and stilted. It's embarrassing.

Scott's eyebrows raise in surprise, clearly not expecting that. "No, I mean, he said goodbye before he left, but no."

"Oh," Isaac says. He should maybe try harder to hide his disappointment.

"Don't worry so much, Isaac. This is just what Derek does. He disappears for a little while, but he always comes back," Scott's voice is reassuring and sincere. Then, he gives a little smile and almost laughs when he adds, "Like a boomerang."

Isaac huffs. "You're awful."

Scott smiles, "Come on, we'll be late."

—

Isaac has a thing about feeling like a burden, especially where Scott is involved. So, despite Scott's genuine offer to drive Isaac to school, he opts to take the bus. Besides, riding on the back of Scott's motorcycle when there are no lives at stake feels awkward.

Isaac arrives at school later than the rest of the group, but he doesn't mind. He just keeps to himself and makes his way to his first class of the day. It's an art class, which, much to his father's chagrin, has always been one of Isaac's favorite subjects. Now, though, Isaac is free to enjoy it.

Allison and Lydia are in the class as well, but Isaac keeps his distance. He picks an easel on the opposite side of the room. They're in his line of sight, but he doesn't have to make small talk. It's a good balance.

Isaac settles in to paint. Typically, Isaac prefers other mediums like pencil and charcoal. He likes the look of watercolor, but the technique has always escaped him. Still, Isaac picks a dark green color and starts in on his attempt to capture something that inspires him, as is the assignment for today.

There are only a handful of students in the class, so it's hard for Isaac to ignore Lydia and Allison's conversation. The room is quiet and he has super-hearing. There's only so much he can do.

Lydia's voice travels across the classroom, saying, "Not the steadiest hand for a superb marksman."

At the words, Isaac glances up from his painting. Lydia's right. Even from the opposite side of the room, Isaac can see Allison's hand visibly shaking.

"It's been happening for the past few weeks," Allison says. "Since that night." They all know what *that night* means. The night Allison, Scott, and Stiles died and came back to life.

Allison drops her paintbrush with a clatter. Isaac watches closely as Allison's eyes turn dazed and unfocused. Lydia rips the ruined paper away, bringing Allison back to herself.

"Start over," Lydia says simply.

Isaac watches as Allison closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. Allison picks the brush back up. Her hand keeps shaking. Isaac would be lying if he said it didn't concern him. Things may be calm at the moment, but they never stay that way, not in Beacon Hills. Allison is a trained hunter, she's proficient in more weapons than Isaac could name, but the bow is her specialty. Hands this shaky will inhibit her abilities, leaving her vulnerable.

"When was the last time you picked up a bow?" Lydia asks. Her voice is pitched lower than before, but Isaac can still hear her.

"Um. The night at the hospital, I think," Allison says.

Lydia tuts. "Well, that's part of the problem. You're never going to get over this fear if you don't try."

Allison huffs. "I'm not afraid."

"Prove it," Lydia says. It's exactly what she needs to say to convince Allison to follow her directions. Isaac would almost be impressed by the ease of her manipulation if he wasn't so worried.

"What do you mean?" Allison asks.

"After school, you, me, your bow. We're working through this," Lydia says. "Today."

Allison agrees. Isaac wishes she wouldn't. This is a horrible idea.

—

Isaac tries to keep an eye on Allison for the rest of the day, but they don't have many classes together. However, every time Isaac crosses Allison's path in the hallway, she has that same faraway look in her eyes. It does nothing to ease Isaac's anxiety.

When the school day draws to a close, Isaac doesn't think about the decision, he just does it. He follows Lydia and Allison out of the school and into the cross country trails. He keeps his distance, focusing on being quiet. Isaac has a lot of practice going unnoticed, so it isn't difficult.

Isaac watches from behind a group of trees as Lydia pins up an archery target.

"Do you really think this is going to help?" Allison calls out.

Lydia marches back over to Allison, saying, "I know that if *you* think it's not going to help, it definitely won't."

Isaac doesn't know what he thinks. On one hand, Isaac understands where Lydia is coming from. She's trying to push Allison through the roadblock. On the other hand, Isaac knows that sometimes a push isn't what people need. Regardless, there's too much that could go wrong here. It makes Isaac nervous. Hence why he's currently crouching behind a pair of trees.

"So get your head into it," Lydia says as Allison prepares her bow. "Shoot a few and see what happens."

Isaac watches as Allison draws the string back. Isaac doesn't have the best view or any expertise in archery, but he can still see Allison

shaking. She releases the arrow. It lands a few feet away from the tree. Isaac winces.

Allison picks up another arrow. She tries again, but the results are the same. The arrow misses the target altogether. Isaac feels pity starting to creep up his throat. He swallows it down. Allison hates pity.

"Maybe hold the string a different way," Lydia suggests. "Try the Mongolian draw."

Allison looks over at Lydia, confusion painted across her face.

"What? I read," Lydia says as an explanation, then, "Try it."

Allison raises her eyebrows, but acquiesces. She grabs another arrow, and, this time, she turns the bow horizontal. Allison pulls back. From his spot behind the trees, Allison doesn't look so shaky. Isaac almost thinks it's going to work, but then, like the others, the arrow clatters to the ground.

Allison heaves a sigh of frustration.

"Okay um..." Lydia says, clearly sensing the tension. She rubs her hands over Allison's arms, saying, "Take a second to close your eyes." Allison does. "And imagine the arrow going into the target."

A moment later, Allison reopens her eyes. They turn wide and startled, she asks, "Did you see that?"

Isaac glances around the woods, but there's nothing out here. Just him, Allison, and Lydia. For a moment, Isaac wonders if Allison caught a glimpse of him, but her eyes haven't moved from their spot just beyond the target.

"See what?" Lydia asks, echoing Isaac's thoughts.

Allison leans down and picks up her quiver, slinging it over her shoulder, and telling Lydia to, "Wait here."

"Are you serious?" Lydia asks incredulously.

"I'll be right back," Allison says.

"You did not just say that," Lydia hisses. Allison ignores her, taking cautious steps further into the woods.

Isaac watches as Allison starts looking in every direction, almost like

she's hearing something. Isaac enacts his super-hearing, focusing on the woods around them, but he comes up blank. There's nothing out here.

Allison calls out to Lydia, who responds in turn. Lydia's voice seems to move right past Allison, like she can't hear her at all. The dazed, scared look is back in Allison's eyes. She's somewhere else entirely.

Allison keeps calling out for Lydia, turning in every direction. Until, suddenly, she goes stock still. She stares straight ahead. She's looking right at Lydia, but she doesn't see her. Allison raises her bow.

In the blink of an eye, Isaac realizes what's about to happen. He jumps out from behind the trees, sprinting towards Lydia. He grabs the arrow out of the air, an inch away from Lydia's face. Lydia gasps.

A split second later and she would have been killed.

As quickly as she disappeared, Allison comes back to herself.

"Oh my god. Oh my god, Lydia," Allison says, dropping the bow and holding her hands up in surrender. Allison looks between Isaac and Lydia. Her eyes are wild, she's visibly shaken.

Isaac looks from Allison to Lydia. Lydia looks just as shocked as Allison does. She's breathing heavily and blinking fast.

Isaac starts there. "Lydia? You okay?"

Lydia looks over at Isaac. She nods rapidly, starting to compose herself. She smooths down her skirt and says, "Yeah... It's okay. I'm okay."

She sounds like she's trying to convince herself just as much as Allison and Isaac. Isaac gives her a once over. She's not hurt, but, unsurprisingly, almost getting an arrow to the face is not a pleasant experience.

Allison shakes her head, "I'm so sorry. I – I don't know what happened I... I saw Kate again. She – I swear she was here."

"This is because of the sacrifice, isn't it?" Isaac asks.

"Yeah, I – I keep seeing my aunt," Allison says, voice quiet. She clears her throat like there's something lodged there.

"And Scott and Stiles are being affected too," Lydia adds. "Scott can't

control the shift and Stiles is having night terrors.”

“Wait. Scott can’t control the shift?” Isaac asks as fear floods his system. That might be worse than unexpected arrows.

Lydia nods. She swallows, then says, “Thank you. I don’t know how you knew to be here, but I’m glad you were. Thank you.”

“I’m glad I was here too,” Isaac says. It’s a lame response, but he doesn’t know what else to say. *You’re welcome* is even lamer.

The three of them leave the woods in an uncomfortable sort of silence. Allison is still out of it, like she’s grappling with the weight of what just happened. Neither Isaac nor Lydia know what to say to her, so they say nothing at all.

When they get to the parking lot, Allison is the first to branch off towards her car, leaving Isaac and Lydia alone together.

“The buses will be gone by now. Let me drive you to Scott’s,” Lydia offers.

“Uh. It’s okay,” Isaac says, not wanting to impose. If he’s honest, he’s surprised by the offer. He often forgets just how much he and Lydia have both changed in the past seven months.

“I owe you,” she says. “It’s not every day someone saves your life.”

Isaac scoffs, “In Beacon Hills, it might as well be.”

Lydia laughs. “Is that a yes?”

“Yeah, okay,” Isaac caves.

—

Scott’s motorcycle is already in the driveway when Lydia drops him off. It comes as a relief to Isaac, who is desperate to fill Scott in on what happened.

Isaac finds Scott in the kitchen. Scott takes one look at Isaac and asks, “What’s wrong?”

“Well, everyone’s okay for now, but...” Isaac trails off. He doesn’t really know how to articulate the impending doom that seems to be hanging over the three surrogate sacrifices.

Scott gestures for Isaac to follow him upstairs. “What happened?”

Isaac trails up the stairs after Scott, saying, “Apparently, ever since the night you three died, Allison’s hands have been shaking constantly. Lydia found out, and, after school, they went out into the woods so Allison could try to use her bow again and she – she shot an arrow right at Lydia’s head.”

“Right at her head?” Scott asks, walking into his room and sitting down on his bed.

“Almost right through it,” Isaac says, pausing just within the doorway. “And she keeps saying the same thing, that she keeps seeing her aunt. Whatever’s happening to you guys is getting worse. If I hadn’t been there, then Lydia would be dead.”

Scott looks up at Isaac, not quite glaring, but close to it. “What were you doing there?”

Isaac is surprised by the question. “I – uh. I overheard them discussing the plan during art class and it... I don’t know.”

Isaac doesn’t have a good explanation. He hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, or even to follow them. Really, he was just concerned, but too awkward to approach them directly.

Scott frowns. “What’s going on with you and Allison?”

Isaac is even more surprised by this question than the last. He feels his mouth drop open.

“Is it more than friendship?” Scott adds on. It’s an unnecessary clarification. Isaac knew exactly what Scott meant, he just didn’t realize anyone had taken notice of him and Allison, let alone assumed there were romantic feelings involved.

Isaac shakes his head. “No, I – I don’t... I don’t think so? I mean, it’s not for me. We... We understand each other.”

“How so?” Scott asks. The annoyance drains from his voice, replaced by genuine curiosity. He pats the spot on the bed beside him, gesturing for Isaac to sit. He does.

“Well, we both lost our moms,” Isaac says. He doesn’t think about his mom a lot. He was so young when she died, he doesn’t even know how it happened, but it’s created an unspoken connection between

himself and Allison.

“So did Stiles,” Scott says, which is true, but it’s different.

Isaac has never had to be the one to say this before. He looks down at his hands and says quietly, “My mom... her death was really sudden so I – I didn’t get to say goodbye.”

Isaac has never gotten to say goodbye. Not to his mom, not to Cam, not to his dad, not to Boyd or Erica. Isaac hopes he doesn’t have to add Derek to the list. He really shouldn’t be thinking about that. Not right now.

“Oh,” Scott says.

“Yeah...” Isaac says. “And we both know what it’s like to have someone we love turn out to be... I don’t know. Not the person we thought they were?”

“Not the person you wanted them to be,” Scott supplies, hitting the nail on the head.

“Yeah,” Isaac repeats.

“Well, I get that too. Maybe not to the same extent, but... you’ve met my dad. Just – don’t forget: you have me, Isaac,” Scott says.

Isaac glances over at Scott, finally meeting his eyes. Scott’s smile is sad, but honest. Isaac’s lip twitches upward.

“Scott, you’re the reason I’m not homeless. I’m not going to forget,” Isaac says, deflecting a little.

“Right. I just meant...” Scott trails off, looking almost self-conscious.

“I know,” Isaac says. And he does. He knows Scott cares about him. He knows he can confide in Scott, and he does, it’s just... it’s nice to extend his circle. Isaac used to have no one, and, now, he has more people looking out for him than ever before. It’s nice.

And it’s all because of Scott.

—

Isaac hadn’t realized it before, but Scott, under the impression that Isaac had romantic feelings for Allison, had been giving Isaac the cold shoulder. Scott spends the rest of the evening opening up to Isaac

about what he's been experiencing since the night of the sacrifices, including his total loss of control during school. Isaac can't help but worry. They really need to find a solution. And soon.

Additionally, Scott must be feeling a little guilty for unnecessarily icing Isaac out because he insists on driving him to school the next day. Isaac still feels a little awkward about the motorcycle thing, but he doesn't want Scott to think he's upset with him, so he agrees.

Once at school, Scott and Isaac have to part ways, but Scott promises to find Isaac during their free period. It's endearing how much effort Scott is putting into making amends, especially when Isaac doesn't feel particularly wronged in the first place. Still, it's nice to see how much Scott cares.

Between classes, Isaac runs into Allison. He stops to check on her, saying, "You seemed pretty shaken up yesterday, are you – are you okay?"

"You'd be pretty shaken up too if you almost killed your best friend," Allison says. She sounds frustrated, but Isaac knows it isn't directed at him. She's frustrated with herself.

"Well, I don't really have a best friend, but I did almost kill Lydia once too," Isaac says, aiming to break the tension.

It works. Allison cracks a smile. "I'm not sure almost is the right word. You *almost tried* before I kicked your ass."

Isaac laughs. "Right."

There's a pause, then Allison says, "Thanks for being there."

"I feel kind of weird about it now," Isaac admits. "I just – I overheard you talking about it in class and... I should have just said something." It's not quite an apology, Isaac doesn't think Allison wants one, but he does feel the need to explain himself.

Allison shrugs, "No biggie. It worked out, anyway."

The bell rings and they part ways. Isaac sighs.

When their free period rolls around, Scott, as promised, comes to find

Isaac. He's waiting outside of Isaac's classroom, subtly rocking up onto the balls of his feet and then back down. Isaac can't help but smile a little. Scott waves when he sees him.

Isaac crosses the hallway with a quiet, "Hi."

"Hey," Scott says, then, "C'mon, we're gonna meet up with the others and try to regroup."

"Regroup meaning figure this shit out?" Isaac asks.

Scott smiles, "Exactly."

Together, they walk to the outdoor tables where they find the rest of the group already set up, notebooks and homework spread out across the table. Scott slides into the seat next to Stiles while Isaac takes the spot across from him. Isaac gets out his own schoolwork, though he doesn't imagine he'll actually get much done.

It doesn't take long for the conversation to start. Allison recaps the story of what happened in the woods yesterday, and Stiles tells them about the strange sign language not-dream he had in Coach's class.

"Okay, so, what happens to a person who has a near-death experience and comes out of it seeing things?" Scott asks.

When Scott says it like that, it actually doesn't sound too unreasonable. That is, until Stiles adds, "And is unable to tell what's real or not?"

"And is being haunted by demonic visions of dead relatives?" Allison continues with the proverbial icing on the cake.

"They're all locked up because they're insane," Isaac says, exasperated by this entire situation. His life is ridiculous. One disaster ends only for another to begin.

"Ha. Ha." Stiles deadpans. "Can you at least try to be helpful? *Please?*"

"For half my childhood, I was locked in a freezer, so being helpful is sort of a new thing for me," Isaac says in his usual sardonic cadence.

"Okay, do we – are we still milking that?" Stiles asks without any hesitation. It's one of the things Isaac loves about Stiles, he always matches Isaac's energy.

"Yeah, we are still milking that," Isaac says easily.

“Hi,” their banter is cut off by a girl approaching their table. “Hi, sorry. I couldn’t help overhearing what you guys were talking about, and I think I actually might know... what you’re talking about.”

Isaac glances at the rest of the group as the girl rambles clumsily. Though the majority of the table is sporting polite expressions, Stiles looks just as confused as Isaac feels. It’s reassuring.

The girl rambles on, “There’s a Tibetan word for it. It’s called ‘Bardo.’ It literally means ‘in-between state.’ The state between life and death.”

There’s a moment of quiet before Lydia, voice teetering on the edge of condescending, asks, “And what do they call you?”

“Kira,” Scott pipes in. All eyes turn to him. Scott, noticing the attention, adds, “She’s in our history class.”

“So, are you talking Bardo in Tibetan Buddhism or Indian?” Lydia asks, once again showing off her vast array of knowledge.

Kira slides into the seat next to Stiles. “Either, I guess. But all the stuff you guys were just saying? All that happens in Bardo.” That gets the attention of the group. They listen closely as Kira continues to explain, “There are different progressive states where you can have hallucinations. Some you see, some you just hear. And you can be visited by peaceful and wrathful deities.”

“Wrathful deities?” Isaac asks, not liking the sound of that. “And what are those?”

“Like demons,” Kira says with a smile.

“Demons,” Stiles echoes in distress. “Why not?”

“Hold on,” Allison cuts in. “If there are different progressive states, then what’s the last one?”

“Death. You die,” Kira says, not realizing the heavy implications of the simple statement. The whole table falls silent as the words sink in. It’s not good news.

—

After school, Scott and Stiles head to the animal clinic to talk to Deaton. If anyone is going to have a solution, it’s him.

In the meantime, Isaac goes back to the McCall house on his own. The

house is empty when he arrives, giving Isaac some privacy. He decides to take the opportunity to call Derek.

As much as Isaac has been trying not to think about him, the worry is constantly at the back of his mind, just waiting to rear its ugly head. It's been three weeks of nothing. Isaac can't take it anymore.

He gets Derek's voicemail. Again.

"Hey, Derek. It's Isaac. Your beta. Who you abandoned. Although, am I still your beta if you're not an alpha anymore?" Isaac sighs, he's getting off topic. "Where the hell are you, Derek? It's been three weeks. I swear, if you're dead, I'll kill you. Just. Call me back. Or randomly show up in town. I don't care. Just..." Isaac trails off. When he speaks again, the anger has left his voice. It comes out quiet and hurt when he says, "You promised, Derek."

Isaac hangs up. He throws his phone onto the bed and wipes the tears from his eyes.

—

Isaac busies himself with homework until Scott gets home. The supernatural threats seem to be making their return to Beacon Hills, so Isaac might as well try to keep up with school while he still can.

By the time Scott knocks on the guest bedroom door, Isaac is reaching the end of his homework. He rolls over in bed, turning to face Scott. "Hey. Deaton know anything useful?"

"Yeah, he – he said when we died, we opened a doorway into our minds? And now we have to find a way to close it," Scott says.

"And that's... useful? Did he at least tell you how you're supposed to do that?" Isaac sits up, completely bewildered.

"You sound like Stiles," Scott says with a hint of humor in words.

"*Never* say that to me again," Isaac says, offended to his bones.

Scott laughs, "I don't know why you two still pretend to hate each other."

"We don't – I don't hate him," Isaac says, almost sheepish. "He's insufferable but... I'm not, I'm not pretending to hate him, am I?"

Scott is clearly trying not to laugh at him. "Sometimes I forget you

never really had any friends before us, then you go and say things like that.”

Isaac frowns. “I – shut up.”

“Anyway, we all know you both care about each other, so maybe... less bickering?” Scott suggests.

“Nope. It’s how I show affection,” Isaac says, which makes Scott laugh.

“And, somehow, Stiles is the insufferable one,” Scott muses.

Isaac smiles. The room goes quiet after that. Scott turns, almost like he’s going to leave, when Isaac calls out, “Wait! Is that really all Deaton said?”

“Yeah, I know it’s not much to work with, but we’ll figure it out,” Scott says. Isaac almost offers to help until he realizes he’s included in the aforementioned we. Scott adds, “Sheriff Stilinski asked me and Stiles to help him with something tomorrow, so that’s where I’ll be.”

Now, Isaac does offer to help. “Can I do anything?”

“Don’t worry about it, Iz.” The nickname comes out of nowhere. Isaac’s jaw drops. Scott must not have intended to say it because he quickly tries to back pedal, saying, “–aac. Izaac.”

Isaac breathes a laugh. “That was terrible.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Scott says.

“Really, Scott? This is what we’re doing? Straight up denial?” Isaac asks, nearly teasing but too hesitant to fully cross that line.

“Yep! Good night!” Scott says, then books it out of Isaac’s room, slamming the door hard behind him.

Isaac hears Melissa yelling from downstairs, “Hey! This house does not have a supernatural ability to heal!”

—

As promised, Isaac doesn’t see much of Scott the next day. He and Stiles disappear, and Isaac doesn’t question it. Scott is allowed to have his secrets. Isaac really doesn’t mind. Isaac fully believes that if he needs to know, Scott will tell him.

Instead of worrying about it, Isaac tries to have a normal day at school. It's an odd experience, but he makes it through the day without dying of boredom, so he calls that a success.

Isaac has been home from school for a few hours when he hears the front door bang open. Isaac doesn't know how, but he knows it's Scott. He's about to go investigate when he hears a car pull up outside. Isaac listens intently. The footsteps don't sound like Melissa's.

The fighting breaks out almost instantly.

"You're trying to get Stiles' dad fired!" Scott's voice is muffled through the ceiling, but Isaac can hear every word clearly.

"I'm trying to help!" a second voice argues. Isaac immediately recognizes it as Agent McCall.

"That doesn't make any sense, Dad! Who are you helping? Just get out!" Scott shouts.

Panic starts to build in Isaac's chest. His heartbeat is rising and his breathing is becoming shallow. He can't stay here. If Isaac stays here, he's going to break.

Isaac glances at the bedroom door, but there's no way he can make it downstairs without being noticed.

The yelling is getting louder. Melissa's voice has joined the mix.

Anxiety pulses through Isaac in heavy waves of fear and nausea. He's starting to sweat. The walls are closing in. He needs to get out. He's starting to feel trapped, and that never ends well.

Isaac searches the room for an alternate exit. There's only one.

As quietly as possible, Isaac creeps towards the bedroom window. Slowly, he opens it.

Isaac's whole body is shaking, but werewolf agility comes to his aid. Isaac climbs through the window, stepping out onto the section of roof covering the front porch. The logical part of Isaac is telling him this is a horrible idea, but his skewed survival instincts are louder.

Isaac jumps.

He hits the ground hard. He's not injured – and if he was, he would heal instantly – but it does take him a moment to regain his footing.

As soon as he does, Isaac doesn't think, he just starts running.

Isaac runs like he's being chased. His feet pound hard against the pavement, but it's nothing compared to the pounding of his heart in his chest. The wind rushes past Isaac, but it's nothing compared to the rushing of ice cold panic in his veins.

Isaac keeps sprinting until a car pulls up next to him, laying on the horn. Isaac startles to a skidding stop. It's Stiles' Jeep.

Stiles rolls down the window, "Dude, what are you doing?"

Isaac stands disoriented on the side of the road. As he looks around, Isaac realizes he's not sure he even knows where he is. He just let his instincts guide him. He didn't think, he just ran.

Stiles must notice that something is wrong because he leans over the center console and opens his passenger side door. "Get in."

Isaac doesn't bother fighting it. He climbs inside the Jeep, purposefully ignoring Stiles' gaze. Isaac waits for Stiles to put the Jeep back in drive, but he doesn't.

"I could sit here all night," Stiles says. "Tell me what happened, then I'll drive you home."

Home. Isaac doesn't even know where that is anymore. Isaac sighs. "I can't go back right now. They were fighting."

The realization dawns on Stiles. "Ohhh, the impeachment."

Isaac nods. He feels like a child. He hates when he gets this way. He wishes his dad would just stay dead. Every time Isaac starts to think he has a handle on it, something triggers him, and he ends up right back in his skeletal clutches.

"Stop pouting, you're making me feel bad for you," Stiles says.

Isaac finally looks up at Stiles. "You know I don't hate you, right?"

Stiles' eyebrows contort in confusion. "I – yeah, Isaac, I know, buddy. I don't hate you either. Now, come on, buckle up. I'm sure Melissa will have kicked Special Agent Dickhead to the curb by now."

Isaac doesn't laugh, but he does put his seatbelt on.

Stiles is right. When they pull up outside, Agent McCall's car is gone

from the driveway.

“Could you maybe...” Isaac trails off.

“Not tell Scott? Sure. He’ll just blame himself and that’s another mess I don’t want to deal with,” Stiles says, easy as anything.

“Sorry you had to deal with my mess,” Isaac says.

Stiles shrugs, “It’s cool. Now I can blackmail you.”

Isaac laughs, “Right. Thanks, Stilinski.”

Isaac gets out of the car and walks up to the house. It’s not home yet, but maybe it could be.

—

Much later that night, Isaac gets a phone call. The ringtone wakes him from his slumber, but, even through the blur of sleep, Isaac doesn’t hesitate. He scrambles to grab his phone, hoping it’s Derek.

The caller ID lights up with Scott’s name.

Isaac sags with disappointment only to immediately reignite with panic. Scott shouldn’t be calling Isaac. They live in the same house.

Isaac answers quickly, “Scott? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing life or death, I’ll explain when I’m home. I just wanted to ask: when was the last time you spoke to Derek?” Scott questions. It’s the last thing Isaac is expecting to hear. It does nothing to quell his anxiety.

“A few days after he left. Why?” Isaac asks in a rush.

“Could you try calling him again? I keep trying, but he’s not answering, and I could really use his help with something,” Scott says. He sounds frustrated.

“Help with what? Scott, what’s going on?” Isaac asks, desperately trying to understand the situation.

“I promise I’m fine and I’ll explain when I get back just – Can you call Derek?” Scott repeats.

“Yeah,” Isaac agrees, deflating. He doesn’t tell Scott he’s certain Derek won’t answer. That would mean admitting how many times he’s

already tried.

For the past three weeks, Isaac has been doing his best to downplay his worries about Derek being missing. There's already so much going on, he didn't want to add to the stress. But, now, Isaac can't pretend anymore.

Derek is in trouble. He gave Isaac his word. He promised he would be back. Isaac trusts Derek wholeheartedly. He wouldn't abandon Isaac of his own volition, which means there is no other explanation. Derek is in trouble.

As Isaac dials Derek's number, he tries not to think about the possibility that Derek might already be dead.

The call goes to voicemail.

More Bad Than Good

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 14

Word count: 6,141

“Please leave a message after the tone—”

Isaac’s hands are shaking so badly he nearly drops his phone. There’s a storm of emotions brewing inside him. He tries to keep everything at bay, but he can feel the panic rising.

He can’t sit still. He pushes the covers off his legs and starts pacing the room. He can’t handle this. He can’t lose Derek too.

Couldn’t lose you too, Derek’s words echo through Isaac’s mind. There are tears forming in Isaac’s eyes now.

Isaac has lost everything, but, somehow, losing Derek would be the last straw. It’s completely unexpected. Overnight, Derek went from the person Isaac was least sure about to, arguably, the most important person in his life.

There was a time before, when Ennis had died, that Isaac truly believed Derek to be dead. Then, he had carried on just fine, but now everything has changed. Now, the mere thought of losing Derek makes Isaac feel sick to his stomach.

With a start, Isaac realizes that his claws and fangs have popped. The once dark room is now enshrined in a faint yellow glow. Isaac is losing control. He takes deep breaths, trying to steady his elevated heart rate, but it’s not working. Isaac buries his claws in his hands. Pain makes you human. It was one of the first things Derek taught them.

Derek. Everything goes back to Derek. Isaac wouldn’t be alive without him.

Out of nowhere, Scott is standing in front of him. His eyes are glowing red and his voice, though not loud, is stern when he says, *“Isaac.”*

Isaac feels a sudden calm spread throughout his body. There’s still blood on his palms and tears on his face, but Isaac’s fangs recede and

the room fades back to its usual cool toned darkness.

“Scott,” Isaac breathes, voice barely loud enough to be considered a whisper.

Scott nods. His hands are on Isaac’s shoulders, keeping him grounded and in place. Isaac is still shaking, his breaths are still labored, but the panic is dwindling away. It’s hard to keep the fight alive when he’s looking in Scott’s warm, brown eyes.

“You okay?” Scott asks. It’s a stupid question. Clearly, Isaac is far from okay. In fact, none of them are okay right now. Scott included. Isaac tries to ignore the guilt that causes him.

Isaac doesn’t say anything. He wants to wipe his eyes, but Scott’s hands are firmly planted and Isaac doesn’t want to dislodge them. The physical affection, as small as it is, is comforting.

“Isaac,” Scott repeats, wanting a response. His eyes are roaming over Isaac, taking in every twitch and detail. He’s assessing for signs of distress, even if it is wholly unnecessary.

“I’m – I’m okay,” Isaac says, meaning he’s not going to wolf out again. It says nothing for his emotional well-being and Scott knows that.

Scott moves his hands and Isaac immediately misses the weight of them. Isaac’s own hands are covered in blood, so he tries to use his shoulder to wipe the tears from his face. Scott makes a soft noise. It’s not quite a laugh, but it borders on it.

Scott makes a gesture for Isaac to wait, then exits. Isaac stands awkwardly in the middle of the McCall house guest room. (He still can’t call it *his* room.) He doesn’t really know what to do with himself. He scuffs his feet on the rug. Isaac notices his phone and nudges it with his toes. He must have dropped it in the midst of his panic.

Fortunately, Scott doesn’t take long. When he returns, he brings with him a wet washcloth.

“For your hands,” Scott says, holding it out to Isaac.

Isaac hesitates. The blood is going to stain and it’s a nice cloth.

Scott, noticing Isaac’s pause, says, “Relax. My mom’s a nurse and I’m a teenage werewolf. We can handle blood stains.”

Isaac relents. He takes the cloth, slowly starting to wipe the blood away. The cloth is warm and the motion is methodical. It helps Isaac soothe the rest of his panic. He keeps his eyes focused on his hands, meticulously cleaning the blood from now non-existent cuts.

As he does, Scott says, "So. No luck, then?"

"No," Isaac says quietly. "I – I've been calling at least once a day since he left," Isaac confesses. It feels embarrassing to admit. After spending so long pretending to have disdain for everyone, opening up about his genuine feelings makes Isaac feel vulnerable.

Scott hums. "I'm sorry I didn't notice you were–"

"It's okay," Isaac cuts Scott off, not wanting to hear how Scott would describe his meltdown. Isaac looks up from the bloodied cloth. "I – we've all been distracted."

"You're right, we have been," Scott says. He adds, "Still, I should have realized Derek going off the grid would upset you."

Isaac hates the way that sounds. It makes him feel pathetic. Scott doesn't mean it to be belittling, but Isaac can't hear it any other way. For the second time today, Isaac feels like a child.

Isaac doesn't know what to say. He fiddles with the blood soaked cloth, turning it over in his palms. Over and over and over. Scott reaches out and gently pulls it from his grip, making purposeful eye contact as he does. Isaac sighs. He wipes the remaining tears from his face, and then finally forces himself to voice his true concern, "What if... What if Derek's–"

"He's not," Scott says, cutting Isaac off with certainty. "We would know."

Isaac frowns. He doesn't understand how Scott can be so sure. Scott may have known Derek for longer, but Isaac is starting to think he knows Derek better. They bonded in a way that Isaac doesn't know how to explain, even to himself.

"Then – Then where is he?" Isaac asks.

"I don't know," Scott says, honestly. Then, "Listen, I know you're worried, and you have every reason to be, but, *I assure you*, Derek will show up again."

Isaac wants to believe Scott, but he fears it might be just another empty promise. Still, Isaac doesn't object. He doesn't want to. Instead, he runs his hands through his hair, and moves the conversation onward. "So, what happened? Where were you?"

"Remember how I told you Stiles and I were helping Sheriff Stilinski with something?" Scott asks. Isaac nods, so Scott continues. "We were looking into this old case from eight years ago. A woman and her two daughters were thought to be killed in a car crash, except one of the bodies, the older daughter, was never found. Up until now, it was believed that coyotes took her body from the wreckage."

"But it wasn't coyotes?" Isaac asks, easily catching on. Strange animal attacks in Beacon Hills are rarely ever actual animal attacks.

"Well..." Scott says. "Sort of? The missing daughter, Malia, she's a – she's a werecoyote."

"A werecoyote? Is that even a thing?" Isaac asks. It doesn't sound outside of the realm of possibility, at least not in this town, but he's never heard it mentioned before.

"Yeah, Allison and I saw it in the bestiary once. The problem is: Stiles and I think that Malia is stuck as a full coyote, and, with the new evidence we found, it's becoming an active crime scene again," Scott explains. He pauses, then adds, "And my dad's involved."

"Sure, why not?" Isaac says baffled, but not disbelieving. The story is complicated, but it's not outrageous by their standards. "So, what's the plan?"

"There isn't one," Scott shrugs. "I was trying to get in contact with Derek because, you know, he was an alpha and knows more about this stuff than I do, but..."

Scott leaves the obvious unspoken, much to Isaac's appreciation. Isaac has never been good at comforting others, but he tries his best to provide Scott with some reassurance. "Don't sell yourself short. Besides, she's survived this long as a coyote, she can wait a little longer."

Scott doesn't seem totally convinced, but he nods, "Yeah, maybe." Then, "Sorry I woke you and upset you and everything. We should go back to sleep."

Isaac wants to say something. He wants to tell Scott he isn't the one

that upset him, wants to tell him there's no need to apologize. Isaac wants to say something sincere, something that holds weight, but he comes up blank. Isaac doesn't know how to communicate his feelings, so he says nothing.

Scott pauses in the doorway and says, "Good night, Isaac."

"Night, Scott."

—

Isaac can't help but feel embarrassed about his loss of control, so he purposely avoids Scott as much as possible the next day. Though, it doesn't actually last very long. As soon as Isaac starts hearing whispers in the hallway of a coyote seen within the school, he knows he has to swallow his pride and figure out what's going on.

Isaac spots a pair of men from animal control rushing through the hallway. Isaac immediately follows after them, allowing them to lead him towards the boys' locker room. There, he finds a small crowd of people. Among them, Sheriff Stilinski is weaving his way through the throng and into the locker room.

Isaac stays on the outskirts of the crowd, but focuses his hearing. He picks up on Stiles' voice, easily recognizable, saying, "I think I know what she was looking for."

It's followed by Scott saying, "You took the doll from the car?"

"Yeah, I thought you could use it, you know, for like her scent," Stiles replies.

Suddenly, Isaac sees an older man start pushing through the crowd. Isaac nudges closer, getting a glimpse inside the locker room. He sees Stiles and Scott, the former of which is holding a small, tattered baby doll.

"Where did you get that?" the man asks. His voice starts calm, but then he roughly snatches the doll from Stiles. "Where did you find this?"

Scott and Stiles, for their part, look like a pair of deer in headlights. The man is looking at the doll intently. When he speaks again, there's emotion in his voice. "It belonged to my daughter."

Sheriff Stilinski steps between Scott and Stiles and the man. "Mr. Tate,

I'm not sure how you heard about this, if you have your own police scanner or what... but you can't be here."

Isaac watches as the sheriff places a hand on Mr. Tate, making to guide him out of the locker room. Isaac can't see much from outside of the room, but he does see the sheriff go still and he hears Tate say, "I have a permit."

Isaac knows what that means. Tate is armed.

"California schools are gun free zones, permit or no permit," Sheriff Stilinski says, he remains calm and quiet, but his voice takes on a dangerous edge. "You need to leave, Mr. Tate. Now."

Mr. Tate huffs and stutters as Stilinski and one of the deputies start to escort him out of the school. Mr. Tate shakes them off. He turns to Stilinski and says, "You find that animal. You find that *thing*."

Tension rises in the air. All of a sudden, the stakes are dialed up to eleven.

A few minutes later, the small crowd disperses, and, with no one hurt and no sign of the coyote, the police leave. Scott and Stiles trail out of the locker room shortly after. Isaac approaches them. "Was that her dad?"

"Yeah," Stiles says, sounding as optimistic as Isaac feels. Mr. Tate heard about the coyote at the school and showed up armed. It's definitely not a good start. If it's any indication of how the rest of the rescue mission is going to go, then they're probably screwed.

"Do we have a plan yet?" Isaac asks, directing the question at Scott.

Scott nods. "We save Malia before her dad kills her."

"And how do we do that?"

—

The answer, it seems, comes from Dr. Deaton. The three of them head to the animal clinic where Deaton has a solution prepared for them.

"Xylazine," Deaton says, walking into the backroom. "It's a tranquilizer for horses." Deaton sets three vials down on the table. "For a werecoyote, expect it to work within seconds. I only have three. So whoever's shooting needs to be a damn good shot."

“Allison’s a perfect shot,” Scott says.

“She – She used to be,” Isaac corrects. He doesn’t say it to be insulting. It’s just the truth. The last time Allison picked up a weapon, she missed every shot and almost killed her best friend.

“She can do it,” Scott reiterates. Isaac admires Scott’s unending optimism and faith in the people he loves, but sometimes he needs a reality check.

“If we manage to find the thing,” Isaac adds.

“Okay, what is the point of him?” Stiles asks, gesturing towards Isaac. “Seriously, I mean, what is his purpose? Aside from the persistent negativity and the scarf?” Stiles turns his attention to Isaac. Isaac greets him with a joyless smile. “What’s up with the scarf anyway? It’s sixty-five degrees out.”

Isaac doesn’t mind Stiles’ verbal assault. It’s a weak insult, and, besides, someone has to be the voice of reason. Isaac doesn’t mind being the one to remind them of their terrible odds, even if it does mean Stiles takes his frustration out on him from time to time. Maybe that’s Isaac’s role in all of this. (And Isaac gets cold easily, sue him.)

“Look, maybe I’m asking the question no one here wants to ask,” Isaac says, looking over at Scott. “How do we turn a coyote back into a girl when she hasn’t been a girl for eight years?”

All eyes are on Scott now. He says, “I can do it.”

“You can?” Stiles asks, sounding genuinely surprised.

“You remember the night that Peter trapped us in the school?” Scott asks, addressing Stiles. Stiles nods. “In the gym, he was able to make me turn using just his voice. Deucalion did the same thing in the distillery.”

“This is a *werecoyote*, Scott,” Deaton says. “Who knows if it will even work if you can find someone who can teach you.”

“That’s why you called Derek first,” Stiles realizes. Isaac feels his heart stutter at the mention of Derek’s name, but he forces his feelings aside.

Scott sighs. “Yeah, I could try it on my own, but, right now, I’m too scared to even change into *just* a werewolf.”

Stiles runs his hand over his face. “We need a real alpha.”

Scott snaps his attention over to Stiles, expression hurt and offended. Isaac has to stifle a laugh into his fist. He’s pretty sure Deaton notices, but Isaac pointedly doesn’t make eye contact.

“You know what I mean. An alpha who can do alpha things,” Stiles explains. “You know, an alpha who can get it going. You know, get it...”

“Up?” Isaac supplies because he’s a menace.

Stiles gestures at Isaac like he doesn’t want to agree, but does.

“Great,” Scott says. “I’m an alpha with... performance issues.”

“Is there anyone else besides Derek who could help?” Deaton asks, steering the conversation back on track.

“I wouldn’t trust Peter,” Isaac says, recalling his mention earlier in the conversation. Asking Peter for help is dangerous. He always has an ulterior motive and it’s impossible to tell whether his advice is genuine or not.

“Maybe the twins?” Stiles suggests, which is somehow worse than Peter.

“They’re not alphas anymore,” Deaton says, which is news to Isaac. “After what Jennifer did, almost killing them? It broke that part of them.”

“Yeah, but what if they know how to do it?” Stiles questions. Isaac doesn’t like where this is going. There has to be another option.

“Nobody’s seen them for weeks,” Scott says.

“Well, actually, that’s uh... not totally true,” Stiles admits. Scott looks over at Stiles in shock. Stiles sighs, and says, “Lydia.”

Realization washes over them. Of course, Lydia is still in contact with the twins. They killed Boyd, but, of course, nobody seems to remember that. Or if they do, they just don’t care. Isaac feels his frustration starting to grow. That is, until Scott turns to look at Isaac, making intentional eye contact. Isaac gives a small nod and swallows his rising anger.

“Okay, so, Stiles and I will go talk to the twins while, Isaac, you bring

Allison the tranquilizer? Then we'll all meet at the preserve?" Scott suggests. Clearly, Scott knows Isaac can't bear to be around the twins, but Isaac is glad for it. He doesn't want to see them if he doesn't have to.

Scott pulls what looks like a torn up t-shirt out of his bag. "This has Malia's scent on it."

"What? You're allowed to take things from the den, but I got in trouble for taking the doll?" Stiles asks, incredulous.

Scott levels Stiles with a glare, and passes the cloth over to Isaac. Isaac takes a whiff and immediately recoils away. Scott barely conceals his laughter.

"You couldn't have warned me?" Isaac asks, roughly tossing the material back to Scott, appearing more annoyed than he actually is. Scott, with his stupid werewolf reflexes, catches it with ease. Isaac was sort of hoping it would hit him in the face.

Scott gives Isaac a half-hearted shrug as if to say, *what can you do?*

Isaac rolls his eyes and turns his attention to Deaton. Deaton hands Isaac the glass vials, saying, "Be careful. You don't want to break them."

Now, with a plan set, they depart.

—

Stiles offers to drive Isaac to the Argent apartment, which Isaac easily accepts. Isaac texts Allison, saying: **On my way with the tranquilizer.**

She sends him a confirmation message, and Isaac slides his phone back into his pocket. In the Jeep, Isaac asks Stiles, "Where are you meeting the twins?"

Stiles doesn't say anything. Isaac knows Stiles heard him, which means he's purposely ignoring him. That can't be good.

"Stiles?" Isaac presses.

"Derek's loft," Stiles mumbles as quietly as he can. Isaac still picks up on it.

"That – what? Why? That's a terrible idea," Isaac says, more defensive

than the situation warrants.

“Derek’s still M.I.A and it’s a semi-neutral meeting ground. Just – it’s fine, okay?” Stiles says.

Now, it’s Isaac’s turn to ignore Stiles. He huffs and goes silent. Stiles doesn’t get to say whether it’s fine or not. This certainly isn’t fine. There’s nothing okay about breaking into Derek’s loft. And with the twins, no less.

Stiles, predictably, breaks after a minute and a half. “Why does it bother you?”

“Because that’s where they killed Boyd,” Isaac says.

Stiles goes quiet again. He drives in uncomfortable silence. Isaac dutifully ignores the tension filling the car. He has every right to feel uneasy about the meeting place. A lot of bad things happened there and a lot of them were the twins’ fault. Stiles can’t guilt Isaac into giving disingenuous support. Isaac won’t cave.

Isaac distracts himself by fiddling with one of the tranquilizer vials. He turns it one way then the other, watching the liquid slide back and forth until the edges of his mind start to drift.

They’re rounding the corner into the parking lot when Stiles says, “I don’t believe you.”

“What?” Isaac asks, too lost in his head to register what Stiles is referring to.

“I don’t think that’s why it really bothers you,” Stiles says as he pulls up outside the building. When Isaac doesn’t say anything, Stiles puts the car in park. He looks over at Isaac and elaborates. “I think you’re bothered because the space means something to you, but you don’t want to admit it.”

Isaac splutters. “It’s – Stop psychoanalyzing me. You’re just as messed up as I am.”

“That’s called deflection,” Stiles says with a hint of humor in his voice. The tension has eased. Isaac knows he’s lost any standing he might have had.

“I’m getting out of the car now,” Isaac announces, opening the door as he does.

Stiles laughs, “Bye!”

“You’re a pain in the ass,” Isaac says, then slams the door closed. Stiles waves through the window with an insufferable smile. Isaac rolls his eyes.

Isaac turns to the apartment complex. With the fragile equipment in tow, Isaac has no choice but to go in through the front door. Still, Isaac doesn’t take the elevator. The Argents live on the fourth floor, but Isaac would rather go up four flights of stairs than subject himself to a couple minutes in a confined space.

Isaac knocks on the apartment door, waiting only a few seconds before Allison lets him in. “Come on, I have the tranq gun set up in my dad’s office.”

Isaac follows Allison deeper into the apartment. Inside the office, the tranquilizer gun is set out on the desk alongside a locked silver briefcase.

Allison rounds the table to the other side, and says, “The combination is 352.”

Isaac sets the vials down and starts putting in the combination. As he does, Allison asks, “Do you think you can hone in on Malia? If not, we’re going to be in the woods for a very long time.”

The briefcase’s lock pops open. Isaac lifts the lid all the way to reveal five darts, a syringe, and three pieces of equipment that he doesn’t recognize. Isaac takes one of the darts, holding it out to Allison, and says, “I have a pretty good lock on her scent. It’s actually kind of strong.”

Allison takes the proffered dart, and asks, “What is it?”

Isaac hesitates. He grabs the syringe from the case and passes it to Allison. Allison takes the syringe, but she’s still looking at Isaac, waiting for an answer.

“Pee,” Isaac admits.

Allison can’t mask her amusement. A small smile works its way across her features as she tries not to laugh. Allison, thankfully, doesn’t comment. Instead, she uncaps the syringe and attempts to insert the needle into the Xylazine vial.

Immediately, Allison starts to shake. Isaac watches her closely. As soon as she lifts the needle, her hand starts to tremble. More than once, she nearly succeeds in piercing the top of the vial, but then, her hand twitches and she has to start again.

“You okay?” Isaac asks, looking away from Allison’s hands. Her expression shows her frustration. She’s noticeably upset.

Allison drops the vial to the floor with a small clatter. She locks eyes with Isaac, and, for a split second, Isaac gets a glimpse of pure distress. Then, a mask of stubborn annoyance falls into place. She quickly looks away again, leaning down to pick up the vial.

When Allison resurfaces, the determination has drained from her eyes. Instead, she’s slipped into that familiar, far away daze.

“Allison?” Isaac asks. The word seems to bounce right off of her.

Frozen, Isaac watches as Allison approaches the dart gun.

“Allison,” Isaac repeats a little louder this time. Once again, it has no effect.

Allison picks up the gun. She’s not shaking anymore. Isaac doesn’t know what to do. This is the part where he should act. He should move out of the way, he should duck, but he doesn’t. Allison aims the tranquilizer gun right at him, and Isaac doesn’t move.

“Allison!” Isaac’s voice is rising in volume.

Isaac doesn’t know if the gun is loaded, but he holds his hands up in defense anyway. Isaac backs away, moving closer and closer to the office door.

“Allison!” Isaac properly shouts.

Abruptly, Allison comes back to herself. She looks up from the viewfinder, finally noticing Isaac. The life returns to her eyes as they flood with shock. “Oh my god! I’m so sorry.”

Allison sets the gun down with a soft clatter, holding her palms up in surrender. She looks just beyond Isaac, not quite making eye contact. “I’m... I’m so sorry.” She meets his eyes. “I don’t know what I was doing.” Isaac slowly lowers his hands. Allison repeats, “I’m sorry.”

Allison turns away from Isaac, obviously unsettled by what just

happened. Isaac takes it upon himself to try to lighten the mood. He steps farther into the office again, saying, “Well, it’s... better than ring daggers, I guess.”

His voice is humorless, but, hopefully, it’s enough for Allison to realize he isn’t upset. Isaac slows his movements as he gets closer to Allison, coming up behind her.

“How am I supposed to help anyone when I’m like this? What am I supposed to do?” Allison asks.

“Allison,” Isaac whispers. She still has a tight hold on the glass vial. It’s tucked firmly into her shaking fist. Isaac reaches out. He takes Allison’s hand and, carefully, pries the vial from her grip. “Let me help you.”

Allison glances up at Isaac, looking almost surprised by his words. Isaac knows Allison doesn’t want or need a pep talk. Anyone else would tell Allison it’s all going to be okay, she can do this, but not Isaac. Allison doesn’t need to hear that she *can* do it, she needs to hear that it’s okay if she *can’t*.

Isaac isn’t doubting her skills, but he’s offering to bear some of the responsibility. He’s giving Allison an out. He’s easing some of the pressure, and, hopefully, that will be enough to steady her hands.

“Show me what to do,” Isaac says.

And so, Allison does. She guides Isaac through transferring the tranquilizer from the vials into the darts. Then, she explains how the tranq gun works. She demonstrates how to hold it properly, she shows Isaac where the trigger is. She teaches Isaac as much as she can, and Isaac, despite not feeling very comfortable holding a gun, listens. He takes it all in, and, by the time Scott texts them, Isaac feels like he can do this.

He remains hopeful that Allison will pull through and be their marksman, but he’s prepared to step in if she can’t.

—

Allison drives them to the preserve where they pull up just behind Stiles’ Jeep and Scott’s motorcycle. They all step out of their respective vehicles, sharing uneasy glances. Nervous anticipation is palpable in the air. There’s no optimism. No one seems confident in what they are setting out to do. Not even Scott.

“Anyone else think we may be doing more harm than good?” Lydia asks, breaking the silence.

“We’re trying to keep a father from killing his own daughter,” Scott says.

“Actually, we’re trying to keep a guy from killing a coyote who is actually his daughter, who we don’t know how to change from a coyote back to his daughter,” Isaac rambles. He doesn’t mean to at first, it just all comes tumbling out. Even as Scott’s expression falls, Isaac can’t stop talking.

“And again with the not helping,” Stiles retorts. He throws his arms out in a questioning gesture.

Isaac smiles, but it’s so devoid of humor that it’s practically a grimace. He nods at Stiles, clearly unimpressed, and mouths, “*That’s great.*”

Scott ignores them, instead turning his attention over to Allison. “Did you bring it?”

Allison pops the trunk of her car. She picks up the dart gun, holding it close to her chest. Isaac watches as she releases a heavy breath.

Out of nowhere, gunshots echo through the preserve. Scott immediately springs into action. He doesn’t stop to talk, just grabs his helmet and climbs back on his bike. He revs his engine and takes off into the woods, ignoring Stiles’ shouts of, “Wait! Wait, wait, wait!”

A frenzied, running-out-of-time feeling takes hold of Isaac. He doesn’t hesitate before following after Scott with Allison on his heels. While Scott sticks to the trails, Isaac and Allison are on foot, allowing them to break off into the rougher woodland terrain. Together, they duck under low-hanging branches and jump over stray roots.

Isaac and Allison pause at the crest of a hill. Looking ahead, the woods spread out before them, spanning for miles. Isaac glances in every direction, searching for any indication of which way to go.

Then, another gunshot echoes through the woods.

They follow it. Isaac sprints ahead, letting the sound of gunshots guide him. As the air rushes past him, Isaac catches onto a faint, familiar scent. *Malia*. Isaac doubles down in his effort, running as fast as he can.

“Isaac, wait!” Isaac hears Allison call out to him, but he doesn’t listen. He keeps running.

Isaac races through the woods, stirring up leaves at his feet. Isaac checks behind him, sparing a glance to see how far back Allison is. Then, with no warning, excruciating pain seers through his leg. Isaac stops in his tracks as metal jaws clamp around his leg. The metal pierces through his skin, nearly hitting the bone. Isaac falls to his knees, crying out in agony.

There’s a bear trap biting into Isaac’s leg. The pain is horrific, it’s running through Isaac like a bolt of lightning. Isaac can feel his body already trying to heal around the metal teeth of the trap, and it only makes it worse. It pulls the trap tighter, drawing it closer, pulling it deeper into his leg. All thoughts of Malia go out the window as Isaac’s brain singles in on one thing and one thing only: *get free*.

Isaac desperately pulls at the trap. He tries as hard as he can to pry it apart, but to no avail. His leg and hands are covered in his own blood. Every time he loses his grip, the trap clamps back down on his leg, furthering the injury. His heart is pounding and his breathing is shallow. Isaac can’t get his leg free. He’s trapped.

Then, through the trees, Isaac spots Tate, gun in hand. Isaac gives it his best effort, but the metal is too strong. He can’t break out. Tate’s going to kill Malia, and Isaac can’t do anything about it.

Allison runs up beside Isaac. She’s looking at him in concern, but Isaac doesn’t care. He’s more worried about Tate.

“Allison,” Isaac grits out. “There he is.”

Allison lifts the dart gun, using the viewfinder to get a good look at Tate.

Isaac tries to hold the trap open just a smidge, taking some of the pressure off of his already wounded leg. Once more, his grip weakens and the trap tightens again. Isaac makes a soft sound of pain.

The pain keeps rippling through Isaac. It doesn’t stop. It intensifies with every passing second. He feels sweat dripping from his body and his heart beating rapidly.

“Hit Tate,” Isaac says. “Use the tranq gun on him, okay?”

Isaac watches in fear as, instantly, Allison starts to shake. The gun is

jostling in her unsteady grip.

“Okay, come on,” Allison whispers to herself. She takes the shot. The dart hits a tree. Only two left.

Allison continues to get herself more and more worked up. If she doesn’t calm down, they’re going to miss their chance. Malia is going to die. Isaac can hardly speak through the pain, but he forces the words out, “Allison. Breathe.”

Allison looks down at him. She gives the smallest of nods. She takes a deep, slightly trembling breath. Then, she turns her focus back to the target. She holds the dart gun up. The stakes have never been higher. Allison has no choice but to fight through this or let Malia die. Allison whispers something Isaac can’t hear over the pounding of blood in his skull. Allison steadies the gun, her hold is stable, and she fires.

The dart hits Tate. His own gun falls from his arms. He drops to the ground.

Even through the earth shattering pain, Isaac can’t help but smile. He breathes out in relief. The threat has been minimized. There’s only one dart left and, apparently, bear traps littered through the woods, but they have some room to breathe now.

Allison, after a moment of pleasant surprise, lifts the gun again. When she looks through the viewfinder, she says, “Isaac. She’s gone.”

Isaac doesn’t have a great vantage point, but, as he surveys the area, he realizes Allison is right. In the commotion, the coyote took off, leaving them powerless. Allison can’t track Malia without Isaac’s help, and Isaac is stuck in a trap.

All the hope and adrenaline seems to drain from Isaac’s body all at once. With it, comes an onslaught of pain. Isaac gasps, his lungs catching in his chest.

Allison kneels down next to Isaac. She sets the gun to the side, inspecting the trap.

“Go,” Isaac says through gritted teeth.

Allison shakes her head. “I’m not leaving you.”

Isaac can’t protest, he doesn’t have the energy.

Isaac keeps trying to get the trap open, but it's no use. The fight has left his body. His energy is depleted and, with no sign of Malia, the motivation isn't there. The pain takes Isaac captive. With every twitch of his leg, the trap digs in deeper. Isaac's breaths are coming slower. His vision is turning blurred. He's losing too much blood.

Then, out of nowhere, a loud howl travels through the woods, ricocheting from tree to tree. It's Scott.

It sparks something primal in Isaac, like a match lighting a fire. Isaac's eyes burn yellow as the animalistic instinct to survive kicks in. Isaac yells out as he fights with everything he has. He pours every ounce of strength, every morsel of energy, into pulling the trap's teeth from his leg. He gives it his all, and then he keeps going. He keeps pulling, he doesn't stop there. He pulls and pulls until he rips the hinges right off the base of the trap. Isaac drops the metal to the ground as his body goes limp.

His leg is free.

Isaac slumps down, completely exhausted. His leg is already starting to heal, but the pain is still there. It lingers, like a sharp knife turning dull with time.

"Now, you have to let *me* help *you*," Allison says, wrapping her arm around Isaac's middle. Isaac has no issue accepting the offer.

Allison supports Isaac's weight as they limp back to the entrance of the preserve. It's a much longer trip on the way back, but, with each step, Isaac's leg continues to heal. By the time they get to the car, Isaac no longer needs Allison's assistance and can hobble on his own.

Stiles and Lydia are standing by the Jeep, waiting for their return. Lydia gasps when she sees Isaac.

"Holy shit, what happened to you?" Stiles asks.

Isaac stares down at the state of himself. He's covered in blood, practically from head to toe.

"Bear trap," Isaac says simply. He can't be bothered to get into the details.

"Are you okay?" Stiles asks, voice genuine.

Isaac nods. "Yeah, I'm pretty much healed already."

“Okay, good,” Stiles says, nodding rapidly. He’s still looking at Isaac’s leg. Distantly, Isaac remembers just how squeamish Stiles is and sincerely hopes he isn’t about to pass out.

“Earth to Stiles,” Isaac says, waving his bloody hand.

It snaps Stiles out of his daze. He says, “Scott did it. He’s with Malia now.”

“We heard the howl, but it worked? She’s human again?” Allison asks.

“Yeah, I have to go meet up with him and my dad,” Stiles says. Then, “Are you sure you’re okay, Isaac?”

“I’m good,” Isaac says, and he really means it. He’s healed and the mission was a success. The whole thing might have been a little traumatic, but Isaac can just add it to the list.

The two pairs split up once again. The Jeep departs first, but Allison doesn’t start her car yet. She pauses, trailing her eyes over Isaac. “I know you already said it but...”

“I’m fine,” Isaac says. “Better me than you, right?”

Allison huffs a breath. Isaac thinks it’s supposed to be a laugh, but it doesn’t quite land. After a moment, Allison starts the car.

They’re pulling out onto the main road when Allison says, “You’re getting blood on my seat.”

Isaac startles. He tries to lift his leg up so that it’s not touching the leather, but it’s no use. He really is covered in blood.

Suddenly, Allison starts laughing.

Isaac drops his leg. “Oh,” he says. “You were joking. I get it. It’s fine.”

Allison tries to fight her laughter, but, when she glances over at Isaac, it bursts out.

“You really shouldn’t make fun of a guy who just got caught in a bear trap. It can’t be good karma,” Isaac says. It comes out more pouty than he intends it too.

“Oh, whatever, you healed.”

It’s true. Isaac did heal. It’s miraculous. Life isn’t great right now, or

ever, but he takes this small moment of triumph to appreciate the wonders of werewolf healing. Things could have gone worse, but they didn't. And that, in and of itself, is a victory.

Galvanize

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 15

Word count: 5,080

Chapter Notes

Hi, sorry I missed last week's updates, I was in the hospital.
Should be back to my regular Tuesday/Thursday schedule now

Isaac is stepping off the bus when he catches sight of Scott and Stiles. They aren't alone. They're talking to the twins.

Isaac picks up the pace, quickly approaching. As he does, he hears one of the twins – Isaac isn't sure which one – saying, "We'd add strength. We'd make you more powerful. There's no reason to say no."

It's immediately obvious what they're talking about. The twins want to join Scott's pack. Isaac, for one, won't stand by and let that happen. Not after what they did.

"I can think of one. Like the two of you holding Derek's claws while Kali impaled Boyd," Isaac says, joining the group. "In fact, I don't know why we aren't impaling them right now."

One of the twins bares his fangs and glows his cold, blue eyes. "You want to try?"

Isaac steps forward, making to fight. But then, there's a hand gripping his wrist, holding him back. Isaac stops in his tracks. He looks back at Scott, finding a look of warning. Isaac keeps his smirk intact, but he falls back in line. Scott releases his hold.

"Sorry, but they don't trust you," Scott says, looking between the two twins. "And neither do I."

Scott brushes past them, expecting Isaac and Stiles to follow. They both do. (Though if Isaac lingers a moment longer to sneer in Aiden's face, then Scott doesn't have to know.)

Isaac branches off towards his locker, leaving Scott and Stiles to go to their own. On autopilot, Isaac inserts his combination and takes out a

notebook and pen for his first class of the day.

With his supplies gathered, Isaac decides to rejoin Scott and Stiles. As he walks up, Isaac hears Scott ask, “I’m the hot girl?”

Caught off guard, Isaac falls still. He looks between Scott and Stiles, searching for some sort of explanation. Instead, all he gets is Stiles saying, “You are the hottest girl,” as he walks backward with fingers pointed at Scott.

Stiles turns, flashing Isaac a grin, and then he’s gone. He disappears down the hallway, leaving Isaac standing there completely dumbfounded. Meanwhile, Scott is wearing a speechless expression, eyes glued to the spot Stiles just vacated.

Isaac musters up a quiet, “What?”

“I’m the hot girl,” Scott says, still staring off into space.

“Yes, you are,” Isaac agrees, nodding. Sometimes it’s easier just to play along with Scott and Stiles’ antics.

Scott pulls out of his daze. His eyes flick over to Isaac, giving him his full attention. His face breaks out into a huge smile. He’s practically beaming. Then, as he starts to walk away, a happy chuckle stumbles out of his mouth, like he can’t hold it back. Isaac watches him go with a smile of his own. *Ridiculous.*

—

Isaac is beginning to think he might be able to scrape through another day of uninterrupted education, but then he steps out of his classroom and finds the hallways brimming with chaos. It hasn’t quite overflowed yet, but it will soon enough. Isaac knows that much.

As casually as possible, Isaac rushes through the hallway, looking for a familiar face. He easily spots Allison and Lydia. They’re standing at their lockers, pretending to be busy; though, clearly, both are paying close attention to the tension stirring around them.

“What’s going on?” Isaac whispers upon arrival.

“We don’t know,” Allison says quietly, “but I’m pretty sure I just saw Scott’s dad.”

That can’t be good. It’s one thing to see the sheriff at the school – that

happens all the time – it's another thing to see an FBI agent.

They don't have to wait long to find out more. Stiles comes running up to them, quickly gesturing for them to follow him. He waits until they're in a more secluded hallway, then says, "William Barrow, the shrapnel bomber, was at the hospital for surgery today. He escaped and the ambulance he stole was spotted near the school."

"The actual shrapnel bomber? The one who brought a bomb onto a school bus?" Lydia asks, sounding shocked and scared.

It's definitely concerning, but it could be worse.

"It gets worse," Stiles says. (Damn it.) "My dad told me Barrow's original bomb wasn't just a random attack. He was targeting kids with glowing eyes."

"Barrow went after kids with glowing eyes? He said those exact words?" Isaac clarifies as they race down a stairwell. If Barrow is at the school and he goes after kids with glowing eyes... Isaac doesn't even want to think about how deadly this could be.

"Yeah," Stiles says. He continues, rambling, "And no one knows exactly how he woke up from anesthesia. Just that when they opened him up, they found a tumor full of live flies, which in any other circumstance would be all kinds of awesome."

Isaac begs to differ, but, before he gets a chance to say anything, Lydia asks, "Did you say flies?"

The question launches a sinking feeling into Isaac's stomach, like the ground has been pulled out from under him.

Isaac turns slowly. Lydia is stopped in the middle of the hallway, no longer walking with them. She's standing there with a grave look on her face. The ground opens up wider.

"Lydia?" Allison questions, watching Lydia closely. They're all feeling it. The same intuition that something terrible is about to happen.

"All day I have been hearing this sound. It's like..." Lydia stops, looking for her words. Then, "This buzzing."

"Like the sound of flies?" Allison asks. They're all walking towards Lydia, waiting for her next words with bated breath.

“Exactly like the sound of flies,” Lydia says, sounding as riled as Isaac feels.

The group shares a nervous look. They’re all thinking the same thing: Lydia only hears these things when someone is about to die. If they don’t find Barrow, if they don’t figure this out, then someone is going to die.

Suddenly, Isaac notices the missing member of their group. “Wait, where’s Scott?”

It’s a general question, but Isaac is looking at Stiles. Scott and Stiles are together more often than they’re apart. Stiles should know where he is.

“I don’t know,” Stiles says, adding to Isaac’s already steadily increasing nerves.

“We have to find him,” Isaac says, thinking of Barrow.

“Yeah just—” Stiles nods, quickly turning to Allison. “Are there are any supernatural links to flies that you know of?”

“Not off the top of my head, but maybe in the bestiary,” Allison says.

Isaac’s foot is involuntarily tapping. Even through the short engagement, Isaac is struggling to stay still. He’s struggling to contain his anxiety. They need to find Scott. They can’t wait any longer, not when Barrow is potentially already inside the school.

Isaac inhales deeply, breathing in the scents of hundreds of students and faculty. It’s difficult to get a lock on one single scent through the sea of people. There’s so many conflicting scents, all battling for dominance. Still, Isaac tries. He focuses, pulling the scents apart, detangling them. Then, through the mayhem, Isaac gets a small hint of Scott. It’s barely there, but it’s so familiar. Isaac practically lives in Scott’s scent since moving into the McCall house. Isaac knows it’s him.

Not wanting to lose the trace, Isaac says, “Come on, Stiles, we need to find Scott.”

Stiles gives in and the two of them run back up the stairs towards the central area of the school. Here, the mixture of smells is more intense, but Isaac keeps his focus on Scott. He drowns out all the other scents, tuning into Scott’s unique fragrance.

Isaac leads the way, following the subtle scent. They weave from one hallway to another. The scent starts to grow stronger. They're getting close. Isaac grabs Stiles' arm, and says, "This way!"

They round the corner into yet another hallway. There, they find Scott leaning against a set of lockers. Stiles all but yells, "Hey, dude! Where the hell have you been?"

Before Scott can get a word out, Lydia runs over from the opposite direction. "The police are leaving," she says, a little out of breath. "Why are they leaving?"

"The police?" Scott asks, evidently not in the loop at all.

"They must have cleared the building and grounds, which means he's *not* here," Stiles says.

"Who? What are you guys—"

"He *has* to be here!" Lydia cuts Scott off, voice firm. Isaac and Stiles both ignore Scott's efforts to gain their attention, instead focusing on Lydia. She's worked up and almost desperate. "That sound... the buzzing I've been hearing? It's getting louder."

"How loud?" Stiles asks, voice painted with concern.

Lydia squeezes her eyes shut. When she opens them again, she looks frazzled. Isaac can't hear what she can – no one can – but Isaac can hear more than the average human. Even that still overwhelms Isaac. He can only imagine how this must feel for Lydia.

Trying to be helpful, Isaac says, "You two deal with the police, I'll fill Scott in."

Stiles and Lydia easily agree, taking off in the direction of one of the exits.

"What's going on?" Scott asks. There's a weight to his words and his gaze. He's confused and maybe even scared.

"Do you know who William Barrow is?" Isaac asks.

"Yeah, the shrapnel bomber. He came into the hospital last night, my mom was..." Scott trails off as the realization starts to dawn on him. "He's here?"

"Yep, and he targets kids with glowing eyes, so this isn't just a regular

disaster, it's a supernatural one too," Isaac says.

"A supernatural disaster," Scott says. He almost looks like he's going to laugh, but then he remembers the gravity of the situation and his expression falls. "And what's with Lydia?"

"Right, yeah, she's been hearing the sound of buzzing all day, like flies. And, surprise surprise, during his surgery, they found a tumor full of live flies inside Barrow," Isaac explains.

"So... let me get this straight: Lydia is hearing flies, Barrow is here, and he goes after people with glowing eyes?" Scott asks, making sure he understands all of the elements at play here.

"Pretty much," Isaac says.

"So what's the plan?" Scott asks.

"Allison is going to check the bestiary for mentions of flies, Stiles is trying to get his dad to stay, and we have to try to find Barrow," Isaac says. Then, "Wait, you said your mom was at the hospital when Barrow was there, right? Maybe she can help."

Scott nods, quickly pulling out his phone. Isaac stands by for a few minutes just watching Scott text rapidly. Isaac bounces on his heels and pulls on the sleeves of his sweater, trying to find an outlet for his nervous energy.

Soon enough, Scott says, "Okay, she's coming here with Barrow's clothes so we can track him by scent."

While they wait, Scott and Isaac relocate, hiding out in an empty classroom for the remainder of the lunch period. Here, they're less likely to get caught out for loitering.

Scott's phone dings, but it's a text from Stiles, not his mom. Scott conveys the message, "Stiles couldn't get his dad to stay. They're leaving a few deputies here and the school is on lockdown."

"Tell him to find Allison," Isaac says. "They'll have to sneak her out so she can look through the bestiary."

After that, it's not long before Melissa arrives at the school. The hallways are mostly empty, but it's still safer if only one of them goes. So, Scott sneaks out the door while Isaac waits in the classroom. From there, Isaac listens in.

"You got it?" Scott asks Melissa.

It goes quiet for a moment. The only sound heard is the rustling of plastic. Then, Isaac hears Melissa say, *"Promise me you'll be careful. I looked right in that guy's eyes, and it was terrifying."*

At those words, Isaac really starts to feel like he's eavesdropping. He lets his focus slip away. He doesn't hear anything else after that.

"School ends soon," Scott says, walking back into the room. "If we're going to stop a bomb from going off before then, we're gonna need extra help."

It takes a second for Isaac to recognize Scott's implication, but, as soon as he does, Isaac protests, "No, Scott, this is—"

"We can't search the whole school by ourselves," Scott says, cutting Isaac off. "There are lives at stake."

With those words, there's nothing else Isaac can say. If he argues further, then he might give Scott the wrong impression. Isaac wants to save lives, he really does, he just doesn't trust the twins to have the same prerogative. Still, Isaac is aware of all that's at stake, so he lets it go this time.

Scott easily tracks down the twins, and the four of them rally outside the empty classroom. Scott quickly explains the situation to the twins, going on to say, "Lydia thinks he's still here even though the cops searched the whole school, but they didn't have one thing..." Scott pulls out the hospital gown. "Our sense of smell."

The basement is the most likely hiding spot, so they plan to start there. In order to cover more ground, they have to split up. Scott, understandably, doesn't trust Isaac alone with either of the twins, so the two of them are paired together. The twins will search one side of the basement while Isaac and Scott cover the other.

Isaac and Scott slowly creep through the red lit basement, all the while keeping their noses out for any remnants of Barrow's scent.

Isaac waits as long as he can before he brings it up. He trails slightly behind Scott, asking, "This is how it's going to be now? We trust them?"

"Just because I'm letting them help, doesn't mean I trust them," Scott says.

It's a pragmatic answer. Even without checking his heartbeat, Isaac knows Scott is telling the truth. He really doesn't trust the twins. Isaac just doesn't know whether that will be enough for Scott to keep them at bay. Scott's instinct is always to see the best in people. He gives everyone the benefit of the doubt, he dolls out second chances like they're nothing. It's not an inherently bad quality. In fact, it's the reason Isaac isn't homeless. Still, Isaac doesn't want to see Scott's forgiving attitude become his downfall.

Isaac doesn't say any of that though. He just says, "Yeah, well, I don't trust them either. Or like 'em. In fact, I – well, I hate them and I actually want them to die."

"Well, if Barrow's actually here and he's got a plan, you might get what you want," Scott says wryly.

For a moment, Isaac stops walking. He watches Scott go with a small smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. Scott usually doesn't play into Isaac's empty threats. In fact, he's usually the first person to scold Isaac. The fact that Scott is going along with it shows just how apprehensive he really is about the twins. It's a reassurance Isaac gladly accepts.

The conversation drops. With ease, Isaac closes the few foot distance between himself and Scott, and they continue their search. They take care to comb over every corner and crevice, leaving no place undiscovered. It's a tricky balance between rushing and going too slow. They don't want to miss anything, but they also want to find Barrow before it's too late.

They've covered a fair bit of ground with no success when, suddenly, the fire alarm starts blaring. Scott and Isaac share a look. There's no way a fire drill would happen during a lockdown. It's a signal.

Isaac and Scott start running. They race back the way they came, darting up the stairs to the main floor. Isaac doesn't know what he's expecting. For the school to blow up behind them, maybe.

But nothing happens.

Scott and Isaac make it out of the school with Ethan and Aiden not far behind. There's no explosion, no disaster. Nothing. Just fresh air and the fire alarm. It should be a relief, but Isaac feels more unsettled than ever.

Lydia and Stiles jog over and the group reconvenes.

“We didn’t find anything,” Aiden says.

“Not even a scent,” Scott adds.

“It’s 3:00, so school’s over. If there was a bomb, wouldn’t he have set it off by now?” Stiles asks. It’s a good question. There’s no logic in blowing up an empty school. Probably.

“Does that mean everyone’s safe?” Ethan asks. He’s addressing the entire group, but all the focus is on Lydia now. They’re looking to her for the answer.

“I don’t know,” Lydia says. “I just...” she trails off. They’re all waiting for Lydia to tell them something worthwhile, but all she can come up with is, “I don’t know.”

The urgency fades. With school over and no sign of Barrow, the immediate threat has been lifted. There’s something going on, they all know that, but there’s no imminent danger.

With their help no longer needed, Ethan and Aiden are the first to depart. They don’t offer their services if the threat returns, they just leave. Isaac isn’t surprised.

“Lydia and I will keep trying to figure this out,” Stiles says, like it’s simple. And for them, it is. That’s what Stiles and Lydia do. They figure it out.

“I have plans, but I’ll be on stand by if anything comes up,” Scott says. Nobody asks what Scott’s plans are. Isaac is curious, but he’s too awkward to be the one to bring it up.

They all turn to Isaac. He realizes they want to know what his plan of action is. Though Isaac is sure they wouldn’t mind, he really doesn’t want to be a third wheel to Lydia and Stiles. Besides, he wouldn’t be much help to them anyway. He’s never the one to figure things out. Still, Isaac doesn’t want to sit around waiting and doing nothing.

He remembers Allison’s assignment, and says, “I – I’ll go tell Allison what happened and um. Help her look through the bestiary.”

No one questions it. They bid each other good luck and head off in their separate directions.

Despite the fact that there's no real need for it, Isaac is a creature of habit, so he scales Allison's building. All is going well until he reaches out to open the window. Unexpectedly, an electric shock pulses through Isaac. He immediately stumbles backwards, letting out an undignified yelp – one he'll deny until the day he dies.

Already up this high, Isaac has no choice but to bite the bullet. (He does have a choice. He could climb back down and take the stairs, but, somehow, that's even more embarrassing.) Isaac reaches out and, this time, he fights through the electricity. It crackles and hurts, Isaac yelps again, but he gets the window open. Isaac climbs inside.

By some mercy, Allison's bedroom is empty, giving Isaac a moment to collect himself. Isaac listens for sounds in the apartment. He hears the clicking of a keyboard and follows it. Isaac finds Allison sitting at the desk in her father's office. She's pretending not to notice him, focusing intently on the screen in front of her.

Isaac leans in the door frame, asking, "Electrified the windows?"

Allison doesn't look away from the monitor. "Yep."

"Didn't wanna say anything about it?" Isaac asks. Allison knows full well that Isaac comes in through the window. He's done it a handful of times now. There's no plausible deniability.

"Nope," Allison says, popping the p.

"Okay," Isaac exhales, shoving down his ego and stepping into the office.

"What are you doing here?" Allison asks. She still hasn't looked up from the computer.

"I figured you could use an extra pair of eyes," Isaac says, rounding the desk. It's not a lie. Isaac did come with the intention of helping, but he also just didn't want to be alone. Allison is good company anyhow.

Allison blows out a long breath of air. Then asks, "Can you read Latin?"

Isaac looks down at the computer screen. He hadn't thought this part through. "No," he admits. "But I can look at pictures."

Finally, Allison looks up at him. She's smiling, reassuring Isaac that

she isn't actually annoyed. Exasperated, maybe, but not annoyed. Isaac can work with exasperated.

Allison takes her hand off the mouse, gesturing for Isaac to take it away. Isaac huffs out a soft laugh. Allison always calls his bluff.

Isaac reaches across the table. He drags the mouse across the screen, clicking on one of the pictures. The image quickly expands, filling the screen with an angry, red mask. Allison and Isaac suck in twin gasps, shallow and quiet. The anger is obvious in the furrowed eyebrows and the mouth parted in a scream, but the eyes are soulless. They're wide and prominent, but there's no emotion there.

Isaac and Allison share a glance, ensuring that the other is experiencing the same creepy feeling. There's something inherently *wrong* about the mask. Isaac can't quite place it.

Allison takes over control of the mouse once more. She hastily closes out of the picture. With the mask gone, they both relax.

"If you really want to help," Allison says, "I can print out the translated pages I've found that mention flies."

Isaac nods his assent. Allison clicks through, printing each page she had marked. As she does, she asks, "What happened at the school?"

"There was no sign of Barrow," Isaac says, straight to the point. There's no use beating around the bush.

"Not even a scent?" She asks. Isaac shakes his head no. Allison continues, "But what – what about Lydia?"

Isaac shrugs. "She was certain he was there. I don't know. She and Stiles are working on it right now, I guess."

Isaac doesn't know exactly what Stiles and Lydia are even looking for. Something to connect Barrow to the other supernatural happenings of Beacon Hills, he supposes.

"Huh," Allison says, just as perplexed as Isaac.

Once the pages are all printed, Allison and Isaac relocate to her bedroom. Allison sits down on the edge of her bed, spreading the papers out across it. She hands Isaac a small pile of already translated pages.

Isaac starts flipping through them, pacing her room as he does. In part because he doesn't know where he's allowed to sit, but also because the movement helps. Isaac feels less idle when he's moving. He feels like he's doing something, helping in some way.

Isaac reads through the stack of pages. The only thing Isaac finds that could potentially be applicable is the story of Beelzebub, the Lord of the Flies. There isn't much there, but, from what Isaac can gather, Beelzebub is a demon associated with gluttony and idolatry. Isaac isn't sure how it fits in, but it could be something.

"Could you sit down?" Allison asks. "Your pacing is stressing me out."

Isaac stops. He must look as lost as he feels because Allison pats the other side of the bed. "C'mon, you can see more of the research this way."

Isaac still feels a little bit uncomfortable, sort of like an intruder, but he caves. He sits down on the opposite side of the bed, asking, "You find anything yet?"

Allison gestures to one of the pages, and says, "There's a reference here about flies being able to carry messages to the dead." She looks up from the papers, asks, "What about you?"

"Oh, just..." Isaac leans across the bed to show Allison his own findings. "Beelzebub? The Lord of the Flies."

Allison takes the page from Isaac, who points out where the story is mentioned. Allison starts reading it over, pen in hand, when the door opens. It's her father.

Mr. Argent immediately looks taken aback in a way that Isaac doesn't quite understand. Not until Allison drops her pen, pushing Isaac back with a hand firmly planted on his chest. Only then does Isaac realize the close proximity between himself and Allison. He hurriedly scoots back to the other side of the bed, sending a few papers fluttering to the ground in his haste.

"Allison. Can I talk to you for a moment?" Argent asks. He doesn't sound mad, but he doesn't sound happy either.

Allison nods. She stands from the bed, exiting the room without a word. She doesn't even look at Isaac as she goes. He wonders if he just ruined everything. Isaac sighs, running his fingers through his hair in stress.

Isaac knows he shouldn't, but he heightens his hearing and listens in.

"Another werewolf? Seriously?" Argent asks. He sounds frustrated more than anything.

"What – No. Dad, it's really not like that," Allison says without a single jump in her heartbeat. It soothes some of Isaac's worries. His actions really have been completely innocent. He doesn't want Allison to think that he's been coming onto her. He wouldn't even know how to do that if he wanted to, which he doesn't. Isaac's feelings for Allison are purely platonic. It's good to know the lack of feelings is mutual.

"Then what were you two doing in there with the door closed?" Argent asks, skeptical.

"Isaac offered to help me with some research," Allison says. *"I think – I think after everything that happened with Derek and Boyd and Erica, he's just... he's a little lost. He's looking for somewhere to belong. He needs friends, and he's been a good one to me,"* Allison pauses, then says, *"Don't forget: he saved your life."*

After that, Isaac stops listening. Allison's voice didn't sound pitying, but her words definitely skew in that direction. Isaac doesn't need to hear what Mr. Argent has to say about it. Besides, it was supposed to be a private conversation to begin with.

Isaac busies himself with looking over the pages of the bestiary. The majority of them haven't been translated yet, but Isaac pretends he understands the foreign language just to give himself something to do.

Time seems to drag on. Isaac doesn't know what Allison and her father could be discussing in such great lengths, but he doesn't listen in. He's not sure he wants to know.

When Isaac's phone rings, he jumps to his feet in surprise. He pulls his phone from his pocket, immediately checking the caller ID. This time, Isaac only feels a small jolt of disappointment when he discovers it's Scott and not Derek. Isaac has tried to stop expecting Derek, but the hope still lingers.

Isaac forces those thoughts from his mind, and answers. "Hello?"

"Barrow took Kira," Scott says in a rush.

"Kira? The new girl?" Isaac asks, confused. He wasn't aware she had any link to the supernatural.

“Yeah. Did you find anything useful? Anything that might help us find them?” Scott asks. He sounds almost frantic. Isaac wonders if this is Scott’s usual brand of wanting to save everyone, or if there’s something special about Kira. Now really isn’t the time to ask, so Isaac doesn’t.

“No, nothing. Just stuff about flies and the dead. Nothing else,” Isaac says. Isaac starts rifling through the pages, trying to find the correct research in case Scott asks for an elaboration. Isaac doesn’t think any of it will be very helpful, but it is sort of interesting.

Scott doesn’t ask for anything more. Instead, he just says, “*All right, thanks.*” Then, he hangs up.

Once again, Isaac is left alone, unsure what to do or how to help. Isaac sits back against the edge of Allison’s bed frame. He starts flipping through the pages of the bestiary, trying to find a detail they missed the first time. Maybe, just maybe, Isaac can find something helpful in time.

Isaac doesn’t know how long he spends flipping through page after page of intricate depictions of supernatural creatures and myths. Isaac does know that he hasn’t found anything of substance and Allison still hasn’t returned. Isaac is trying not to think about the latter. He certainly doesn’t want Allison to be on the outs with her father because of him.

Out of nowhere, the lights start flickering. It’s a steady blinking at first. On then off. The sun has long since set, so with each blink, Isaac is left in darkness. On then off. Slowly, Isaac sets the papers down and stands. Isaac glances around the room, searching for the source of the black out. There’s nothing there. On then off.

The lights don’t come back on again.

Isaac looks around. Without warning, a figure comes out of the shadows. It doesn’t break in, it just appears, born out of the darkness. Isaac hears a low rumbling sound. He follows it with his eyes. Another shadow of a person materializes.

Suddenly and inexplicably, Isaac is surrounded. Isaac looks in every direction, searching for a gap to slip through, but they’re all around him. The shadow men. They’re human by shape, clothed in dark cloaks and silvery masks, but there’s something *wrong* about them. Fear floods Isaac’s senses. The shadow men are closing in on him. Isaac has no means to escape. He’s trapped.

Isaac goes stock still, too caught off guard by their abrupt appearance to fight back. Two of the shadow men round on him. They don't move like humans do. They're fast and not quite solid. They're looking right at him.

The door slams closed. There's a distant sound of shouting and fists pounding on the door, but Isaac is too enraptured to call for help.

Two of the shadow men reach for Isaac's neck. Isaac tries to fight back, tries to shake them off, but it's no use. He screams as they hold him still.

One of them looks right at Isaac. There are eyes behind the mask, but not like any Isaac has ever seen before. They glow, but not like a werewolf's. They're green-ish yellow and shockingly bright. Like a firefly.

As soon as their eyes meet, Isaac goes still. He can't fight it. The shadow man is looking deep into his eyes. It's like he isn't looking at Isaac, but through him. He's searching for something within him, something that can't be seen from the surface. It's intimate and invasive. Isaac feels violated.

With a heavy handed swipe behind his ear, the shadow man releases him. Isaac crumples to the ground. He's frozen, both still and cold.

Then, just as suddenly and inexplicably as they arrived, the shadow men leave. They fade back into the darkness. They disappear.

Illuminated

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3B episode 16

Word count: 6,224

Isaac can't move. He's shivering and convulsing. He's so cold. He can still feel that invasive stare looking through his entire body. He feels gross and violated and cold. He's so cold. He can't stop shaking.

He doesn't notice the Argents entering the room. All he can focus on is the freezing chill and lingering feeling of *wrong*. He doesn't hear them telling him to turn. He's so cold and scared. He's terrified. He doesn't feel the first punch to his jaw. They came out of nowhere. He doesn't understand.

Isaac feels his jaw crack. He's pulled back to reality with the startling sensation of pain searing through him. Then, immediately, his healing kicks in. His jaw mends together in seconds. His eyes glow as he pushes Argent off of him.

Isaac scrambles backward. He finally takes notice of Allison and Mr. Argent kneeling on the ground beside him. Isaac leans back against the bed frame, chest heaving with thick gulps of air. Isaac's eyes are wet with tears. The cold is slowly dissipating, fading out of his limbs, but the fear is still there. It still has a hold on his lungs and his heart.

"Did you see them?" Isaac asks. He's whispering. He doesn't know why he's whispering.

"Who?" Allison asks, matching Isaac's volume and leaning closer.

"There were five of them," Isaac says. A tear slides down his cheek. "They wore black and uh – I couldn't... I couldn't see, I couldn't see their faces. They were – They were covered."

"What do you mean? Like masks?" Allison asks.

Isaac hears the question, but he barely registers it. He just keeps going, "One of them I could see his eyes. They were green-ish yellow like a..." Isaac pauses, remembering the bright eyes with the x-ray stare. "Like a firefly."

Argent stands, moving to check the windows. Isaac is hardly paying attention. He can feel Allison's hand on his shoulder, but it's a far away thing.

"Security system wasn't triggered," Argent says.

"How'd they get in?" Allison asks.

"They didn't," Isaac says. "It's like they came out of the shadows."

Isaac can still feel their presence. It's like they're still there, lingering in the darkness. They came on him so quickly. In seconds, the shadow men had him surrounded. He was defenseless. He was completely helpless. Isaac hates feeling that way. It used to be his default setting, but now he has power. Now, he's supposed to be able to defend himself.

"Do you know what that means?" Allison asks. "Dad?"

"Um... I'm not sure," Argent says, quietly.

Isaac hears Allison and her father talking, but he doesn't engage. He lets the words wash over him, all but ignoring them. He rests his hand in his hair, trying to calm down. He can't shake the feeling that he failed. He doesn't know what the shadow men came for, but he's certain they got it.

"Listen, the two of you," Argent says, coming back round the bed to address them directly. "I need you to keep this quiet for a few hours."

"From everyone?" Isaac asks, instantly thinking of Scott.

"Just twenty-four hours," Argent says.

Allison squeezes Isaac's shoulder, says, "They could have killed him, Dad."

She's right. Isaac hadn't considered the possibility, but Allison is right. They could have done so much worse. Maybe they already did.

"But they didn't. And I think there was a reason why," Argent says. Isaac feels himself perk up at the words, desperate for any insight into what just happened to him. "I think they might have been after me."

Allison looks surprised, but Argent doesn't give them any further explanation. He just turns and leaves the room.

“Are you okay?” Allison asks once her dad has left.

Isaac wipes at his eyes, clearing away any remnants of tears. “Yeah, I’m – I’m good.” Allison looks skeptical, but Isaac barrels ahead. He needs to get up. He needs to move on. “I should get back to Scott’s, see if they found Kira.”

“Kira?” Allison asks.

In the commotion, Isaac forgot Allison didn’t know about that. Isaac nods, “She was the one Barrow was after. Last I heard, he had taken her.”

“Oh,” Allison says, sounding surprised. “Well, let me drive you.”

Isaac, feeling exhausted from the day’s events, agrees.

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As they drive, Isaac notices that the town of Beacon Hills is devoid of light. Isaac wonders if it’s because of the shadow men, or something else entirely. He doesn’t ask. In fact, Isaac doesn’t say anything for the entire ride, and neither does Allison. She drops him off at the McCall house without ever asking if he’s okay, for which Isaac is grateful. He doesn’t feel like talking right now, and he definitely doesn’t want to rehash what just happened.

When Isaac walks through the front door, much to his dismay, Scott is sitting in the living room. It’s almost like he was waiting for Isaac. Not letting him escape, Scott says, “Hey, Isaac.”

“Hi,” Isaac says, entering the room. He bows to fate and joins Scott on the couch.

For a long moment, Scott just looks at Isaac. Isaac is sure he looks a mess, but he doesn’t let Scott get the first word. Instead, Isaac jumps in, “What happened with Kira? Is she okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, she’s – she’s okay,” Scott says, nodding. “Barrow took her to a power station, but we got there in time. There was a bit of an electrical explosion... which may or may not have caused the blackout.”

Isaac lifts his eyebrows in surprise. So it wasn’t the shadow men. Part of Isaac is happy that they didn’t cause the blackout. It makes Isaac feel better to know that the only one affected by his inaction was

himself. However, the other part of Isaac almost wishes the shadow men were the source. If they were, it would give Isaac an excuse to tell Scott.

Scott keeps looking at Isaac. His gaze doesn't have the same reach as the shadow men's did, but Isaac still feels like Scott is looking right through him. It's like he's seeing the real him. He's looking past Isaac's exterior, and seeing his truest self. It's not unsettling, it's not invasive. It is intimate, but it's not bad. It's almost comforting.

"Are you okay?" Scott asks genuinely.

Isaac hesitates for a moment, then says, "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine."

It's not very convincing, Isaac knows. He desperately wants to tell Scott what happened. He wants to blurt it out, he wants to ease the guilt that's lodged in his throat. And he could. He could lay everything out on the table. Isaac wasn't the one who made a promise to Argent. He wouldn't be doing anything wrong, but, still, Isaac says nothing. He doesn't want to betray Allison or Argent's trust, not when he worked so hard to gain it in the first place. People are *finally* starting to trust him. Isaac can't mess that up.

Scott doesn't seem to believe him, but he doesn't press the subject. When Isaac stands, Scott lets him go. Isaac can't decide whether he's glad for it or not. Isaac wants Scott to push. He wants Scott to notice that something is wrong. He wants Scott to ask again because Isaac knows he won't be able to lie a second time.

But, for that same reason, Isaac is grateful Scott lets it rest.

—

Isaac's plan to keep himself from telling Scott is simple: avoid him at all costs for the next twenty-four hours. It shouldn't be too difficult. They live together, yes, but Isaac will just find somewhere else to be. Despite the continuing blackout, they still have school today, and, fortunately, Scott and Isaac only have one class together. Barring any supernatural disasters, Isaac thinks he can make this work.

He gets up earlier than he normally would, wanting to be out of the house before Scott is out of the shower. The first problem Isaac runs into is Melissa. She's in the kitchen attempting to find something to make for breakfast that doesn't require electricity.

"Oh," she says, not quite startled, but close to it. "You're up early."

“Yeah, uh,” Isaac hesitates, trying to come up with a believable lie. “I’m meeting up with Allison. Don’t tell her I told you this, but she’s failing econ.”

“Coach’s class?” Melissa asks, seeming surprised by the information. “Well, I’m glad she has a friend like you to help her. You kids have enough on your plate without having to worry about grades.”

Isaac doesn’t miss the use of the word friend. There’s no strange emphasis or waggled eyebrows. Melissa really means it. She knows they’re just friends. Isaac fills with warmth.

“Yeah, she – she has better grades than I do in pretty much every subject but... not econ,” Isaac says, which is true. Isaac doesn’t care much about school. His education is always getting interrupted and, without the pressure from his dad, Isaac can’t find it in himself to care. He’s still convinced he might not make it through high school, so why worry. It’s all bullshit anyway.

“Well, you know, school is important. Maybe she can help you out too,” Melissa suggests. It isn’t a nasty comment. She’s genuinely looking out for Isaac.

Isaac smiles. “Yeah. Maybe.”

—

When Isaac gets to school, he tracks down Allison. He tells himself he’s covering his bases, making his lie believable, but, really, Melissa got to Isaac. Something about her simple words and warm mom smile made Isaac want to try harder.

“Hey, Allison. I was wondering, what if I helped you with econ and you helped me with chemistry?” Isaac asks. He’s still struggling with the subject. Now, he has the excuse that Mr. Harris being ritually sacrificed put his learning on hold, but that’s all it is. It’s just an excuse. Isaac has never been very good at science, and he knows that.

Allison is staring at Isaac like he’s grown a second head, unconvinced and confused.

Isaac tacks on, “I know you’re failing.”

Allison’s eyebrows raise in surprise before falling as she glares at him. “How do you know that?”

Isaac shrugs, "I'm observant."

Allison sighs, "Okay, fine. You can come over after school if you want."

Isaac spends the rest of the day trying to keep his head down. He avoids the hallway where Scott's locker is and checks the cafeteria for any signs of him before entering. Isaac realizes that he might be going a little bit overboard, but he doesn't like the idea of lying to Scott. It makes him feel guilty. Scott has done so much for Isaac, and, now, Isaac might be putting him in danger by not sharing information. Isaac hates the way it makes him feel.

Isaac is going through one of the back hallways when he hears them. *"You offered up Derek's loft for the blacklight party? Are you insane?"*

Isaac immediately recognizes the voice of the twins. The second one responds, saying, *"Derek hasn't been seen in weeks and we know he has a backup generator."*

Isaac feels sick to his stomach. The twins only know about the backup generator because they had to use it when the alpha pack cut the building's power. The night Boyd died. The night Boyd was *murdered*.

Isaac's anger starts to bubble up to the surface. He tries to tamp it down, but he's not in control. He buries his nails into his palms just as his claws breach his fingertips. Isaac tries to take a deep breath, but it just shudders through him. He's upset and frustrated and scared, and this is the last straw. It's just too much.

Isaac isn't surprised that the twins don't care about Derek's disappearance, but nobody else seems to care either. Scott had, for a moment, but then the next crisis popped up, and Derek was forgotten. There will always be another crisis.

Nobody is worried, nobody is looking. Nobody is doing anything. Isaac isn't doing anything.

Isaac squeezes his eyes shut tight. Derek's voice pops into his head, *Yeah. I care about you too.* Isaac remembers the way Derek's car had swerved, the way he had to force himself to say it. *I care about you too.*

Isaac's heart rate starts to drop. His claws recede. When he opens his eyes, the hallway is bathed in its usual fluorescent light.

Looks like Isaac has a new anchor.

When Allison comes to find him after their final class, Isaac has made it through the rest of the day without another slip up. Allison offers to drive since they're both going to the same place. For a brief moment, Isaac wonders if his lack of independent transportation is as inconvenient to others as he thinks it is. Well, there's nothing Isaac can do about it.

They walk into the apartment building together, Allison leading the way. She bypasses the elevators and goes straight towards the stairs. Isaac knows the town-wide blackout will have shut off the elevators, but there's something purposeful about the way Allison does it. It's a weighted decision.

Allison doesn't say anything about it, and neither does Isaac, but he can feel his heart swell. He fights down a smile. He's a little bit embarrassed that Allison noticed his discomfort towards elevators, but, more than anything, he feels happy. He feels cared for, looked after. It's nice.

So, they take the stairs up to the fourth floor apartment. Allison leads Isaac into her bedroom where she pointedly keeps the door open. Isaac wonders if they should talk about their unexpected friendship, but he can't find the words for it. Instead, Isaac perches awkwardly on the edge of Allison's bed.

They start looking over Allison's econ notes from earlier that week with Isaac explaining the concepts she doesn't understand. It's going well, but, as soon as they switch over to chemistry, Isaac loses his focus.

Back in Allison's bedroom, Isaac's mind keeps straying to the shadow men, how they appeared out of thin air. The room is bathed in natural light now, but it won't be for long. With the blackout still persisting, the moment the sun sets, the room will grow dark. The shadow men could come back.

Isaac should have told Scott. He would feel so much more at ease knowing that Scott was aware of the situation. Isaac should have—

“Isaac!” Allison's voice is raised.

Isaac snaps back to himself. His eyes dart to Allison, who looks more

concerned than annoyed. Isaac glances down at the notes he was holding, but finds a torn page instead.

“Sorry,” Isaac says. He releases his grip on the paper, letting it drift down onto the bed. He’s still in control, his claws aren’t out, but he’s clearly preoccupied.

Allison sighs. “It’s okay. We just – you need a distraction. I can see the wheels turning right now.”

Isaac huffs. “*This* was supposed to be my distraction.”

“Studying?” Allison laughs. “When has studying ever interested a high school student? I mean, besides Lydia. No, what you need... is a party.”

Isaac easily recognizes Allison’s implications, and adamantly disagrees, “No, no, no. I – I’m not a party person.”

“Have you ever been to a party?” Allison asks. She’s looking at Isaac like he’s something amusing. Her eyes are alight with excitement. She’s almost teasing Isaac now.

“I went to the rave,” Isaac says with a shrug. He knows it’s not a good enough answer, knows it won’t let him weasel out of this, but he might as well try.

“That wasn’t a party, that was a rescue mission,” Allison says. “Come on, we still have some time to kill before my dad’s twenty-four hours are up. I promise you’ll have fun.”

Isaac strongly disagrees. There’s no way a loud, crowded party is going to help Isaac have fun or relax in any way. It’s the worst kind of environment for him. And yet, Allison has been so kind to Isaac. She’s been nothing but caring. He might as well try.

“All right, fine.” Isaac says. Allison grins, big and bright. It might be the most genuinely happy Isaac has ever seen her. It might make the whole thing worth it. Might.

—

Isaac opens the door to Derek’s loft, and is greeted by a party surpassing anything he could have dreamed up.

The first thing Isaac notices is the sheer amount of people. There are

dozens of bodies, jumping and dancing. Everyone is covered in neon colors in the form of clothing, paint, and glow sticks.

The second thing Isaac notices is the music. There's a DJ blaring music so loud they have to shout to be heard. The bass is practically shaking the floor.

The third thing Isaac notices is the colors. The usually dull loft has come to life with a bright, neon rainbow. Between the people and the decorations plastered to every wall and pillar, there isn't a single corner left in the dark.

Allison walks up next to Isaac. When the inside of the loft comes into view, she falters back a step in shock. The party is so much bigger and wilder than they ever could have anticipated.

"Derek can never know about this," Isaac says, trying to envision Derek's reaction to something like this. Derek would go ballistic if he knew there were this many strangers in his loft, desecrating it.

Allison and Isaac are both a little bit out of their depth, but Allison is committed. She grabs Isaac's wrist and pulls him into the loft. "Come on!" she yells over the music.

The music is already grating at Isaac's nerves, but he wants to give this a proper chance, so he follows Allison's lead. She guides him deeper into the loft, though they stay along the outskirts of the party.

"I'll get drinks!" Allison shouts.

"I can't get drunk!" Isaac yells back.

Allison shrugs, "It's part of the atmosphere! Just go with it!"

Isaac lets her go, though he doesn't particularly enjoy being left alone in such an out of control crowd. Isaac sways awkwardly to the music. He keeps his eyes locked on Allison, not wanting to get separated in this mess.

He watches her approach the bar, holding up two fingers. As she waits for the drinks, she seems to freeze. For a moment, Isaac thinks Allison is having another hallucination, but her eyes are still focused, present. Isaac follows her gaze. She's looking at Scott. Isaac didn't know Scott was going to be here, but there he is. He's standing next to Kira, but he's looking at Allison.

Even from a distance, even with the chaos around them, Isaac can feel the tension between Scott and Allison. Isaac doesn't understand why they aren't together anymore. He understands why Allison broke it off after everything that happened with Gerard and her mom and Jackson, but he thought they would have gotten back together by now. Clearly, they still love each other.

It doesn't make sense to Isaac, but a lot of things don't. Isaac won't say anything about it. He never does. That's sort of his *modus operandi*. Isaac observes others, he tries to know what's going on. He's part of things, but, like this party, he's on the outskirts of it all. He has thoughts and opinions, but he doesn't share them. It never seems like his place.

Allison is handed the drinks and the moment breaks. She rejoins Isaac, two cups in hand. Isaac looks down at the liquid, even it is glowing. Isaac downs it in one swallow.

"Did you see Scott?" Isaac asks, even though he knows she did. He sets his empty plastic cup down on a nearby surface. The entire loft is already littered with trash. Isaac hopes someone has plans to clean this all up.

"Yep," Allison says. They're close enough now that they don't have to shout to hear each other. She sips at her drink.

"You tell him what happened?" Isaac asks, even though he knows she didn't. Isaac has to speak a little louder than Allison does. He doesn't have the privilege of talking to someone with super-hearing.

"No. We still have a couple hours, remember?" Allison says. "We promised my dad."

"You promised your dad," Isaac says. He doesn't know why the distinction is important, but it is. Isaac wants to keep the trust he has with Allison, but he didn't promise anything. He would never promise to keep something from Scott.

"I promised him in order to protect him," Allison says. She sounds like she's getting irritated now.

"You did," Isaac says. "I didn't." It's probably not a very nice thing to say, but the more time passes, the more restless Isaac becomes. It's not his intention to be cruel, he just feels torn. Torn between the Argents and Scott. Torn between two people he trusts. It's not a pleasant feeling.

“Is protecting my father such a bad thing?” Allison asks. She’s smiling, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

“I don’t like keeping secrets from Scott,” Isaac admits, although it’s not much of a surprise.

Allison looks over at Isaac, making eye contact with him. She’s giving him a weird look, one Isaac can’t quite read. He knows his relationship with Scott might be a little strange, but Isaac owes him everything.

After a pause, Allison cracks a smile, this time more sincere than before. “No, you don’t.” Then, “Do you wanna talk about Scott or do you want to enjoy the party?”

Isaac hesitates. It sounds like a genuine question, like Allison really is asking. Isaac’s not really a party person, but he’s also a people pleaser. So, he says, “Well. I guess we were here for a distraction.”

Allison grins. The slight animosity between them fades as Isaac allows Allison to lead him out onto the dance floor.

Isaac tries to let loose, but he’s stiff. His mind is still racing. Allison easily finds the rhythm, dancing effortlessly. Isaac timidly bops along to the music, but he can’t make himself relax. It just isn’t going to happen, not like this.

Isaac, feeling awkward and uncomfortable, reaches up to scratch the back of his neck. That’s when he feels it. It’s like a raised marking behind his left ear. As soon as Isaac touches it, he remembers the shadow men holding him still. He remembers the way they had released him, swiping down over his neck.

“There’s something on my head,” Isaac says to Allison.

Allison stops dancing. Isaac grabs her hand, guiding it up to feel the spot. She traces over the symbol. She feels it too. They lock eyes, and, suddenly, a feeling of distress runs between them.

“To the bathroom,” Isaac says, loud enough to be heard. Knowing the loft so well, Isaac maneuvers them through the crowd with ease. Isaac hasn’t been in this bathroom since the day he almost died, but he ignores those thoughts. There’s no time. There’s something wrong, and they have to figure it out.

“Turn towards the mirror, turn towards the mirror,” Allison repeats in

a rush. She helps angle Isaac's head in a way that has the back of his ear reflected in the mirror. "You see that?"

"What is that?" Isaac asks. There's a dark black symbol on the back of his head, right behind his ear. It's slightly raised and stands out against Isaac's pale skin. The shape is easily recognizable.

"It looks like the number five," Allison says.

Someone groans. The music is still pounding through the walls, but the noise is unmistakable. It came from right behind them. Isaac turns. "Did you hear that?"

Allison slowly shakes her head. Isaac steps away from the mirror. He cautiously approaches the opposite side of the small bathroom. There, behind the bags of ice, is the shaking, dull eyed form of one of the twins.

Isaac doesn't even think about who it is, he just moves on autopilot. He pushes the ice bins out of the way. He lifts the twin, readjusting him so his back is propped up against the wall. Isaac pats, almost slaps, the twin's face, but his eyes remain dead. His stare is blank and his body is cold as ice. Isaac knows what this is.

Isaac grabs the twins arm.

"What are you doing?" Allison asks, despite how obvious Isaac's intentions are.

"It'll trigger the healing," Isaac says. He doesn't hesitate. He snaps the bone. Maybe some distant part of Isaac's brain takes pleasure from inflicting pain on one of the twins, but, in the moment, he isn't thinking about that. He's just thinking about bringing the twin back to himself.

The twin immediately roars. His fangs drop into place and his eyes glow blue. Then, he goes limp.

Allison reaches out, she carefully tilts the twin's head to the side. Embossed into the skin behind the twin's ear is the familiar black, backwards 5.

"It's the same," Allison says. "Exactly the same."

Suddenly, the music in the loft cuts off. Isaac and Allison share a frantic look. That can't be good.

“We have to get him out of here,” Isaac says. The shadow men are nowhere to be found, but Isaac knows firsthand how quickly they can materialize. The twin is too weak to fight now, too vulnerable.

Isaac hits the twin’s face, probably a tad more harshly than necessary. The twin blinks rapidly, starting to come back to himself.

“Help me get him up,” Isaac says to Allison. Between the two of them, they’re able to get the twin to his feet. He’s conscious, he’s just not fully present yet. Isaac and Allison support the twin’s weight, taking him out of the bathroom and back into the main room of the loft.

Isaac spots them right away. There, amidst the crowd of party goers fleeing the loft, are the shadow men. All five of them. They look just as ominous as Isaac remembers, clad in black armor cloaks and silver masks. Fright runs through Isaac like a shiver in the cold.

The shadow men turn in unison. When they move, they seem to ripple. Black smoke trails behind them, delayed and billowing.

“Guys,” the other twin says. “They’re all looking at me.” He’s right. All five shadow men have directed their attention towards the twin. They take a synchronized step forward. “Why are they all looking at me?” Another step. “Guys!”

Two people lunge. It’s Scott and...

Derek.

Derek is here. There’s an instant, unstoppable feeling of happiness and relief. It’s instinct. It spreads through every inch of Isaac’s body. He can barely contain his grin.

Isaac would be lying if he said his trust in Derek hadn’t wavered in the past weeks, but he’s here. Derek is here. He’s okay. He’s alive. He came back.

Derek is *here* and he’s trying to fight the shadow men. He growls, fangs bared and eyes bright blue. He leaps at one of the figures. Derek grabs hold of his neck. He twists, and there’s an audible snapping of bones. Derek shifts his focus, looking for the next fight, but Isaac keeps watching the injured shadow man. He watches as the black, shadowy smoke flows through the air, pulling back into the body.

The shadow man’s head clicks back into place like nothing happened. He’s perfectly fine.

Derek turns his head, seeing the decidedly not dead shadow man standing there. In his surprise, Derek hesitates. The split second pause gives the shadow man all the advantage he needs. He throws Derek back with great force. He ricochets off one of the stone pillars, crashing to the ground. Hard.

Isaac finally springs into action. Seeing Derek alive had stunned Isaac still, but seeing him hurt sparks a fight in him. Isaac pushes the twin's arm off his shoulder, stepping forward. He flicks his claws out with a satisfying sound.

One of the shadow men turns to face Isaac. This time, Isaac is ready to fight him. He's prepared. He's not afraid and he's heavily motivated. Isaac isn't messing around.

The shadow man looks right at him. It doesn't scare Isaac. The shadow man reaches into his chest, pulling a sword out of the shadowy depths. He swings the sword through the air, creating rapid circles of billowing smoke. That scares Isaac. He steps back.

The shadow men round on the twin.

"Somebody do something!" Allison yells, but there's nothing to be done. The twin is surrounded and they're no match for the shadow men. Not if they also have swords. Isaac knows that. So do Scott and Derek, apparently, because none of them move. They all watch in enraptured, frozen fear.

The shadow man holds the twin, hand resting right over the back of his head, behind his ear. It's the same way they held Isaac. The shadow man looks right into his eyes. Isaac watches the panic fade from the twin's eyes as his stare turns blank. Then, the shadow man swipes a finger over his neck and drops the twin to the ground.

The shadow men don't leave. They aren't done yet. They turn on Scott.

Scott growls at them, red eyes piercing through the darkness. The shadow men aren't deterred. They keep moving closer and closer to Scott. One synchronized foot after the other.

The sun starts to rise. It shines over the horizon and the buildings, bringing light and warmth into the loft. The shadow men seem to disintegrate. Their solid forms fade away into dust, and then, nothing. They're gone.

Silence falls over the group. The first twin runs over to the second's shivering body. Isaac turns his focus back to Derek. Derek slowly stands up from the ground, appearing unharmed.

"What the hell were those things?" Scott asks.

Isaac looks between Scott and Allison. The sun is rising now. The day has come and gone.

"Your dad's twenty-four hours are up," Isaac says.

"What does that mean?" Scott asks, turning his attention onto Isaac and Allison. The others follow his lead, looking to them for an explanation.

"They attacked me last night," Isaac says. He tries to ignore the shocked and betrayed expression on Scott's face. "They came out of the shadows. They didn't fight, they just..." Isaac trails off. He doesn't quite know how to explain what the shadow men did.

"They just look at you, like they're looking through you. And they – they marked you, right?" Derek asks.

Isaac whips his head over to Derek. It's the first words Isaac has heard from him in weeks. "Yeah. How did you–"

"They came after me too," Derek says. He rubs over the spot behind his left ear. Isaac wonders if that's why Derek came back. Not for him, but for the newest supernatural threat.

"Why didn't you tell me, Isaac?" Scott asks. He sounds disappointed and maybe a little angry.

"My dad made us promise not to," Allison cuts in. "I made Isaac keep it a secret, so just... don't be mad at him. My dad, he – he said he thought they were after him. He asked us to give him twenty-four hours."

Scott looks bewildered, but less angry. "Does your dad know what they are? What they want?"

"I don't know," Allison says. "I should... I should call him."

Allison pulls out her phone, dialing her dad's number. Meanwhile, the twin, whichever one got marked first, is trying to help the other who is shivering on the floor.

“Pain triggers the healing,” Isaac says, loud enough for him to hear. “I didn’t just break your arm for fun.”

The twin hesitates for a moment, like he doesn’t know whether or not to trust Isaac, but, eventually, he follows his instructions. He punches his twin hard. He comes back to himself with a howl. The first twin helps his brother up and they make to leave.

Isaac turns to Derek. He’s about to pull a smug I-Told-You-So expression when he sees the strange look on Derek’s face. It’s contemplative and almost sad. Isaac tilts his head, trying to figure out what’s wrong. (Well, apart from the shadow men with x-ray vision.)

Isaac plays over the last few minutes. *I didn’t just break your arm for fun.* Isaac has to swallow his sigh. Of course, Derek would take that personally. The arm breaking incident might not have been Derek’s finest moment, but he should know by now that Isaac has forgiven him. Isaac has seen the change in him. It was nothing more than a throwaway comment.

Before Isaac can amend it, Allison says, “He didn’t answer. He – He always answers.”

Allison looks back and forth from Isaac to Scott. Her concern is plain across her face. Scott jumps in, saying, “I have to drive Kira home, but then we’ll go find him.”

Isaac had almost forgotten Kira was there. She’s standing slightly behind Scott, looking nervous and awkward. Isaac isn’t sure how much he trusts her yet. There’s nothing inherently threatening about her, but her sudden appearance in their lives has perfectly lined up with the arrival of new supernatural dangers. After everything he’s been through, Isaac has learned that rarely is anything a harmless coincidence.

“I can’t wait,” Allison says, shaking her head. “I’ll go home, I’m sure he’s – I’m sure he’s there.” She doesn’t sound very sure. She turns to face Isaac, “Do you want to come with me?”

Isaac is caught off guard by the question. Maybe he shouldn’t be, all things considered, but he is. Isaac doesn’t know whether Allison is asking because she wants him there, or because she knows that Isaac hates feeling like he’s doing nothing. Isaac hopes it’s the latter because he can’t go with her. Not yet.

“I’ll uh. I’ll meet you there, I just – I just have to talk to Derek first,”

Isaac says. Allison doesn't look all that disappointed, so Isaac tells himself it's fine.

And so, Scott, Kira, and Allison depart. Derek and Isaac are left alone in the loft.

Derek looks around, taking in the destroyed state of the place. There's humor in his voice when he says, "I cannot believe you let this happen to my loft."

Isaac laughs. He wants to be mad. He wants to sulk and make Derek pay for abandoning him, but Isaac just doesn't have it in him. He's too relieved to see Derek, alive and well. Still, he crosses his arms over his chest and asks, "Where the hell have you been?"

Derek huffs, it's almost a laugh. "Really, Isaac? We're gonna play this game?"

"Where were you, Derek?" Isaac repeats. The fake anger has dropped from his voice, but there's a hurt that lingers. Isaac can't find himself to be embarrassed about it, not around Derek. "You said you'd only be gone a week, but that turned into two and then three and then..." Isaac trails off. "You didn't even text."

"I'm sorry," Derek says. And he means it. Isaac can tell, but he still wants an explanation. He needs one. Derek continues, "I – I went to Mexico to get something and it... it didn't go as planned."

"What happened? What were you getting?" Isaac asks. When Derek doesn't immediately say anything, appearing hesitant, Isaac adds, "I trust you, Derek, you know that, but you have to give me something. I need to know why you weren't even answering your phone. I called you so many times."

Derek nods. "I know. I listened to all of your messages." Derek gives him a soft, sad smile. He exhales. "Peter and I went down to Mexico, and we got taken by some nasty hunters. We eventually broke free and found what we were looking for. I got back to Beacon Hills yesterday... I didn't want to tell you I was back until I was sure, and then, suddenly, I was being attacked by those shadow things and..."

"Until you were sure of what?" Isaac asks. It's the most important question Isaac has. There are other concerning details in Derek's explanation, but this one seems the most prudent.

"That I wasn't making a huge mistake by staying in Beacon Hills,"

Derek finally admits. "I thought maybe you might be better off if I left. The people closest to me... they always get hurt. And I'm not an alpha anymore." Derek sighs. "I wasn't sure if you needed me."

"That's what you went to Mexico to find out? Why didn't you just ask me? I would have told you the obvious truth: I do need you," Isaac says. He's more exasperated than mad.

"You sound just like her," Derek says with a laugh.

"Who?" Isaac asks.

"My mother," Derek says with that same sad smile. "I went to Mexico to get her claws. There's an ancient ritual involving the claws of a dead werewolf that can allow you to speak to them."

"And she told you were being an idiot?" Isaac asks.

Derek laughs, "Not in those exact words. She told me the only way I could influence what happened to you was by staying. If I left, it wouldn't have been for you. It would have been an act of fear."

"Again, I could have told you that," Isaac says, but he's smiling. "So you're back for good then? You're not leaving again?"

Derek gives a small laugh. "Couldn't leave you."

Silverfinger

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 17

Word count: 8,611

Breaking their slightly awkward reunion, Derek tells Isaac, “I’ll drive you.”

It takes Isaac half a second too long to recognize Derek’s meaning. In reuniting with Derek, Isaac had almost forgotten about Allison and her father. As much as Isaac wants to stay here with Derek, catching up and mending the residual hurt, he can’t. He has to prioritize, and, right now, that means helping Allison.

Once they’re on the road, Isaac broaches the subject, asking, “So, if you’re back, does that mean Peter is too?”

“Unfortunately,” Derek deadpans.

Isaac groans. “You couldn’t have left him behind?”

“You don’t actually mean that,” Derek says with a soft almost chuckle.

Isaac huffs. He doesn’t like emotionally astute Derek.

Derek pulls up outside the Argent apartment at almost the same time as Scott. He’s dismounting his motorcycle just as Derek sets the car in park. Scott notices and waits outside the building for Isaac to join him.

Isaac turns to Derek, “I’m glad you’re back. Thanks for the ride.” Then, as he gets out of the car, “If you dodge my calls again, I *will* kill you.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Derek says sporting a small and private smile.

Isaac flashes Derek a smile of his own. It’s so good to have him back.

Derek drives off, leaving Isaac to meet up with Scott. Isaac finds Scott standing by the front door, watching Isaac with a peculiar look in his eyes. It’s eerily similar to the expression Allison subjected Isaac to at the party, in response to his connection with Scott. Isaac wishes people would stop perceiving him and his weird relationships.

“Everything okay?” Scott asks as Isaac approaches.

They don’t really have time for a full conversation right now, and they both know that, so Isaac says, “Yeah. All good.”

Scott leads the way into the building, pressing the button for the elevator. (The blackout is still hanging around like a relative overstaying their welcome, but the apartment complex got a generator set up since Isaac and Allison left for the party the night before.) And Isaac, despite his typical one-sided rivalry with elevators, doesn’t actually mind. The ride will give him a chance to talk to Scott, at least for a moment.

Once the doors close on them, Isaac waits two full seconds, then says, “I’m sorry. I should have told you about the shadow men.”

Isaac watches Scott, waiting for his reaction. His lips quirk into an amused smile, mouthing the words, “*shadow men*,” to himself. Scott turns to meet Isaac’s eyes. Only then does he say, “It’s okay, Isaac. I get it. You were in a weird position. I wish you had told me, but I get why you didn’t.”

“The Argents are kind of terrifying,” Isaac says, almost to explain himself. “Allison has stabbed me so many times.”

It makes Scott laugh, nodding like someone with plenty of firsthand experience. His smile creeps into his voice, saying, “See, I totally get it.”

The elevator doors open with a soft *ping*!

The pair walk out into the fourth floor hallway, immediately noticing that the door to the Argent apartment is gaping open. Isaac and Scott share a nervous glance before slowly, cautiously stepping inside the apartment. Isaac takes care to quietly shut the door behind them.

When there are no immediate signs of danger, Scott calls out, “Allison?”

“In here!” Allison yells back. They follow her voice into her dad’s office. There, they find Argent sitting in his desk chair, notably beat up with Allison peering over him and dressing his wounds.

“Oh my god, are you okay?” Scott asks, rushing over to the desk. For a brief moment, Isaac becomes supremely aware of the stark differences between himself and Scott. If it were Isaac, he would have asked what

happened. The priorities are completely different. It makes Isaac pause.

“I’m all right,” Argent says in his usual gruff voice. Now that the initial shock has worn off, Isaac notices that Argent’s injuries don’t actually seem too bad. They’re superficial. It’s a minor comfort.

“I ran into some trouble, but I’m all right,” Argent says, noting Scott’s unconvinced expression. He continues, “Listen, I – I owe you all an explanation. Take a seat.”

Isaac and Scott share another quick look, almost assessing the situation before they give in and sit down in the twin chairs opposite Argent. They wait with bated breath for Argent to start speaking. He holds all the power. It’s like he has their fate in his hands. It’s a feeling Isaac is all too familiar with, but that doesn’t mean he likes it. He doesn’t like having to rely on others for much needed information. Maybe it’s his trust issues at work...

“I met them once on a gun deal in Japan,” Argent begins, jumping into the thick of it. He keeps squeezing his eyes shut, like he’s trying to blink away the memories coming to the surface. Isaac feels a wave of sympathy run through him. He knows what it’s like to have to recount traumatic memories for the sake of the greater good. It certainly isn’t fun.

“I didn’t recognize your description until you mentioned their eyes,” Argent says, talking to Isaac. “When I encountered them in Japan, one of them went after one of the men I was meeting. It looked at him... and its eyes... The eyes are unique. They glow, but not like a werewolf’s. They’re brighter, more piercing.”

“His eyes were glowing?” Scott clarifies, serving as a reminder that Scott hasn’t been on the receiving end of their x-ray stare. Not yet, at least.

“There was something almost ritualistic about it,” Argent says, clearly remembering the moment he saw the shadow men. “Like it was looking right into his soul.”

“That’s the same thing it did to me,” Isaac says, instantly remembering the chilling stare of the shadow man.

“That’s what they did to everyone,” Allison adds, still focusing on cleaning the wound across Argent’s forehead.

“Not everyone. They only came after the werewolves,” Scott says, eyebrows lifting as the realization dawns. He directs the words at Argent, looking for confirmation that this detail means something.

“And Lydia,” Allison corrects.

“Anyone with a connection to the supernatural,” Argent verifies.

“Then who was the guy they went after in Japan?” Isaac asks, searching for information and clarity. If the shadow men only go after people with a supernatural connection, then they shouldn’t have been after Argent the other night. There’s more to the story, Isaac knows.

“A kumicho. A yakuza boss,” Argent says. “It was my first gun deal. I was only eighteen, it was supposed to be a simple exchange. Except Gerard left out the minor details of the buyers being yakuza... He wanted to see if I could adapt in the moment. Testing my ability to, uh, improvise.”

“Or your ability to survive,” Allison says, voice turned as bitter as she probably feels. Gerard certainly is a piece of work.

“The moment the sun went down, it was like they just materialized out of the shadows,” Argent says, sounding all too familiar. “They had swords, not curved like katanas, but straight, black steel. Like ninjatos.”

“What did they want?” Scott asks. It’s the all important question. If they know what the shadow men want, then maybe, just maybe, they might have a chance at stopping them.

“To get to the kumicho,” Argent says. He drifts for a moment, like he’s reliving the memory. Eventually, he speaks again. What he says next is certainly cause for alarm, “They cut down every living thing in their way.”

Isaac reaches up, feeling over the mark behind his ear. The color has started to fade, but it’s still there, almost like it was branded into his skin. “Did they mark him like they did us?”

“Not exactly,” Argent says, just barely meeting Isaac’s gaze out of the corner of his eyes. “The kumicho wasn’t a werewolf. He was something else entirely, something inherently *wrong*. He had glassy, orb-like eyes and sharp, silver teeth. He was killed by the shadow men. Impaled on their swords without mercy.”

“What was he?” Scott asks.

“I don’t know,” Argent says with a faint shake of his head. “But there might be someone who does. There were a few others who survived that night. One of them was a man named Katashi... They call him Silverfinger because of an unusual prosthetic.” Argent pauses, then falls into the story once more. “And it looked like he was getting ready to take them all on himself... I’ve known for a while Katashi was in the country. I spent yesterday trying to track him down.”

Isaac points to the gash on Argent’s head, stating the obvious, “Didn’t look like he wanted to be found.”

“Not particularly, no,” Argent says.

“You think he knows what they are?” Scott asks, starting to rise from his chair, getting an intense look about him. “Or what they want?”

“Maybe,” Argent says simply.

“What if he doesn’t want to talk?” Allison asks, voice quiet.

“What if he doesn’t even remember you?” Isaac asks, thinking logically. The gun deal was a long time ago, Argent was only an eighteen year old kid at the time.

Argent stands, moving towards a wooden box sitting atop the desk. Isaac hadn’t noticed it till now.

“He’ll remember this,” Argent says, spinning the box around and flipping open the lid. He pulls back the cloth wrapping, revealing a shattered mask. Even in broken pieces, the mask is distinct, it’s recognizable. It’s the same mask the shadow men wore.

“When Katashi moved to take them on, I finally pulled myself up from the ground. I shot one of them, aiming right at his mask, shattering it,” Argent says. “I know I didn’t kill it. I’m not sure you can, but I slowed it down long enough for us to get out of there.”

Scott reaches into the box, picking up the biggest, central piece of the broken mask. It’s a dark gray, almost black. It’s muted and matte, not the shiny silver Isaac remembers. It’s almost like shattering the mask turned it dull.

“What was behind the mask?” Scott asks, still staring at the shard.

“Darkness,” Argent says. “Absolute darkness.”

That’s lovely. They’re up against unkillable ninjas made of darkness.

“So what do we do?” Scott asks, finally looking up. He gently sets the fragment of the mask back in the box, slotting it into its rightful place between the other pieces.

“For now? You go to school,” Argent says, like it’s obvious.

It’s a horrible answer, and Scott knows it. He seizes up, like he’s going to protest, but then Argent levels him with a look. There’s no anger, but it’s stern. Isaac leans back against the desk, flicking his eyes between the two, waiting to see which force wins out.

“He’s right, Scott,” Allison pipes in, keeping the peace. “You go to school. Isaac and I will meet you there.” There’s something about the way Allison says it, something in her tone that makes it glaringly obvious she has no intention of meeting Scott anywhere.

Scott must notice this anomaly as well because he nods, “Okay. Let me know if you find anything.”

Then, Scott heads on his way. Once he’s gone, Allison turns to her dad, “How are you going to get in contact with Katashi?”

“The real problem is: Katashi doesn’t see visitors. Ever,” Argent says, walking along the back length of his office. “He’s a paranoid recluse who rarely steps outside the gates of his estate.”

“So how are you going to get to him?” Isaac asks.

“Well, he’s got a thing for rare, antique weapons,” Argent says. His tone and expression are smug, indicating he already has a plan. “Yesterday, I had some contacts put out the word that I was selling one from my own collection.” Argent opens the locked cabinet behind him, carefully taking out a large, square, glass case. He sets it on the table, revealing its contents. There’s a gun, antiquated in appearance, suspended inside. The plan is becoming clearer now. “This is a French Flintlock Turnover Pistol from 1645.”

Also recognizing the implications, Allison states, like it’s a fact, “You’re not going alone.”

“If she’s going, I’m going,” Isaac adds without hesitation.

“To be honest, I don’t feel good about bringing either one of you,” Argent says, which doesn’t come as a surprise.

“They were looking right at Scott when the sun came up,” Isaac says. He might have already been marked, whatever that means, but Scott, at this moment, is untouched. Isaac would like to keep it that way.

“Well, that doesn’t necessarily mean he’s the one they’re going after,” Argent says unconvincingly.

“But if he is?” Allison questions. They can’t pin their fate on a technicality, on a *necessarily*.

“If he is,” Argent says, standing up straight, “that might only leave us till nightfall to come up with a way to protect him.”

“All right,” Isaac says. He presses up from the table, dropping his hands to his hips. “Let’s go see if a paranoid yakuza wants to put another gun in his collection.”

“Well, not yet,” Argent says, putting a wrench in Isaac’s eagerness. “We have a couple hours till the meeting. I think you two should try to get some rest.”

As soon as Isaac hears the words, the weight of his tiredness starts to hit him. He’s been up all night, fighting ninjas and going through an emotional reunion without a drop of sleep. Isaac is used to sleepless nights, but they’ve become few and far between since moving into the McCall house. The nightmares still linger, but the house feels safe. It goes a long way.

Allison’s expression shifts, eyes squinting, almost glaring. “If you think you’re going to pull a fast one on us and go by yourself, it’s not happening.”

Argent releases a small exhale of a laugh. “Don’t worry, I’m fully aware. We should *all* rest. I’ve been up all night too, remember?”

Isaac watches Allison and Argent, observing them. They have a very unique parent-child relationship. They’re almost like equals. Argent is still the adult, of course, but he values Allison’s input as much as she does his. They have the same fierce protectiveness over each other, too. It’s admirable, it stirs something like longing inside Isaac.

Still, Allison looks hesitant. “What time is the deal?”

Argent rolls his eyes. “We have to leave here by 2. Set your own alarm, okay?”

Allison nods and heads towards her bedroom, leaving Isaac floundering for a moment. He keeps his anxiety hidden under the surface. Instead, he just turns to Argent and asks, “You have a couch, don’t you?”

“Smart boy,” Argent says with the hint of a smile. He looks at Isaac like he’s really drinking him in, almost dissecting him. Isaac tries not to waver under the gaze. For a moment, Isaac thinks Argent is going to say something more, but he must think better of it because he just gestures for Isaac to follow him.

Argent leads Isaac into the small living room area within the apartment, offering up the couch. It probably isn’t long enough for Isaac’s unnecessarily lanky body, but he doesn’t care. The fatigue is really setting in now, he could sleep anywhere.

Standing in the doorway, Argent says, “Teenage boys are hard to trust, but you saved mine and Allison’s lives. So, if you say you’re just friends then... I’ll *try* to believe you.”

It’s probably the best Isaac is ever going to get from Argent, so he says, “Thank you, sir.”

Argent exits the room without another word.

Alone in the room, Isaac curls up on the slightly uncomfortable couch – it’s definitely not as nice as Derek’s, that’s for sure – and instantly falls asleep.

—

Isaac wakes to a hand shaking his shoulder. He blinks his eyes open blearily, squinting up at the offender. It’s Allison. She’s gently jostling him with one hand while the other holds a plain white plate. She’s changed her clothes as well. Her hair is pulled back and she looks refreshed and ready to leave. Isaac, still in his clothes from the day before, feels groggy and tired and a little gross.

Isaac sits up slowly, allowing his body a chance to acclimate to the land of the conscious.

Allison holds the plate out to him. It’s just a sandwich. It’s nothing special, but, as soon as it comes into Isaac’s line of sight, his stomach

grows. He doesn't even remember the last time he ate. Lunch the day before, maybe.

Allison, hearing the noise, laughs. "Eat, then we have to go. Okay?"

"Okay, thanks," Isaac says, taking the plate from Allison. She leaves the room, busy preparing herself for the task that lies ahead. Isaac, with his priorities properly in check, scarfs down the sandwich.

When Isaac is finished eating, he brushes the few crumbs from his shirt and sets the cleared plate upon the coffee table. Then, he goes to find the Argents.

They're back in Mr. Argent's office, waiting for him. When Isaac appears, still a little out of it, but ready nonetheless, they depart. Nobody says anything when Isaac opts to take the stairs down to the garage, though Argent and Allison choose to ride the elevator on their own. Isaac doesn't let himself wonder if they're discussing Isaac's aversion to small spaces.

The three of them load into one of Argent's many cars with Isaac sliding into the backseat. Isaac can't help but remember the last time he rode in a car with Argent. It was the night they rescued Boyd from the bank vault. It feels so long ago now, but the pain is fresh and raw. Isaac purposefully pushes the memory down, desperate to stay present.

Argent drives them to the outskirts of Beacon Hills, eventually pulling into the parking lot of what appears to be a massive warehouse. Here, Argent says, "Now, we just have to wait for Katashi to show up."

Isaac leans forward, resting his arms on the back of the front seats. He settles in to wait a while, not expecting Katashi to be punctual.

Surprisingly, it's not long after that when Argent's phone buzzes. Isaac can't see the screen from here, but he can hear the way Argent sighs. He puts the phone back in his pocket, body language betraying his frustration.

"What is it?" Allison asks, noticing Argent's blatant disappointment and becoming concerned.

"Katashi won't do the buy in person," Argent says.

"But he's a paranoid recluse. Shouldn't you be a little less surprised?" Isaac asks, recalling Argent's own words from earlier.

"I was trying to remain optimistic that we wouldn't have to go to my Plan B," Argent says, making eye contact with Isaac in the rearview mirror.

"Plan B?" Isaac asks, not aware there was a back up plan. "And what's Plan B?"

"How tall are you?" Argent asks, subverting Isaac's own question.

There's a quiet beep and then the whirring sound of mechanics. Immersed in his confusion, Isaac looks behind him, watching as the trunk of the car slowly lifts open. Isaac definitely doesn't understand what Argent is implying, but he has a sinking feeling he isn't going to like it.

"I'm 6'2"," Isaac says absently, distracted watching the hatch open. Then, he turns to look forward once more, locking eyes with Argent, not in the reflection, but in the physical form. Then, slowly, "Why...?"

Argent sucks in a breath. "You're definitely taller than me, but we'll just have to make it work."

"Make what work?" Isaac asks, looking back and forth between the Argents and getting increasingly frustrated by the vague answers.

"You're going to have to stall Katashi's men while Allison and I sneak in and find the man himself," Argent says as if that's something Isaac can do. He's completely overestimating his abilities.

"Wait, me? Do the deal? Are you crazy?" Isaac asks.

"It's our only option," Argent says, stepping out of the car, essentially closing the conversation.

Allison glances back at Isaac, giving him a sympathetic smile, but then she too gets out of the vehicle. Isaac has no choice but to follow. He rounds the car where he finds Argent pulling out a suit and small piece of paper.

First, he gives Isaac the notes, "*This* is everything you need to know about the gun you're selling." Next, he hands Isaac the suit, "And *this* you need to put on."

Now, the height question starts to make sense. Isaac wants to fight it, he wants to protest, but their window of opportunity is limited. If they don't make this meeting work, then the sun will set and Scott's fate

will be sealed. He'll be completely defenseless. So, Isaac takes the items.

Argent leads Allison back around to the front of the car where they start looking over the warehouse blueprint, devising a plan to infiltrate the building.

Isaac sets the all important sheet of notes down in the trunk of the car, reading over the page as he starts to change his clothes. The words all sound like nonsense to Isaac. This is never going to work.

Isaac moves quickly, feeling awkward getting changed in broad daylight with Allison and Argent so close by. Isaac knots the tie, slips on the suit jacket, and ties his shoes. He feels ridiculous. He catches a glimpse of himself in the car's reflection. He *looks* ridiculous.

"Guys," Isaac calls out, picking up the page of notes. "This isn't – This isn't going to work. I look – I look ridiculous. I mean..." Isaac walks around the car, gesturing to his ill-fitting jacket. "I look like I just stepped out of the last period of a Catholic prep school. And there is no way that I'm going to be able to remember all this. I mean, what does this even mean?" Isaac reads off the notes, "Revolving over and under barrels?"

Isaac sighs. He knows he's rambling, knows the words are tumbling out of him in a manner akin to Stiles' speaking patterns, but he can't help it. He's feeling the pressure. There's too much that could go wrong, and Isaac is entirely unprepared. He never should have taken that nap. He should have dedicated every spare moment to memorizing all this weaponry jargon. It's like a foreign language to Isaac.

"All you have to do is keep them talking long enough to allow us to get inside and find Katashi," Argent says, like it's simple. None of this is simple. "He may not be there for the buy in person but... he won't be far."

"You look great," Allison says in an attempt to calm Isaac's rampant nerves. It doesn't work.

"I am sweating, all the way through my jacket," Isaac argues. Allison doesn't seem to be listening, but he continues, mumbling, "I didn't even know that I could sweat this much."

"Give me a second," Allison says to her dad, completely ignoring Isaac's tangent.

Allison leads Isaac back to the other side of the car while Argent backs away, giving them some semblance of privacy.

Allison looks Isaac right in the eye, and says, "You can do this."

Isaac exhales deeply, averting Allison's gaze. Her heart rate doesn't jump. She really does believe in him, but Isaac doesn't share her faith. He can't do this. There's too much riding on this. If he can't even convince himself, how is he going to convince Katashi's men?

"Listen to me," Allison says. "You're not a boy, if you go in there *acting* like a man." Allison captures Isaac's eyes again. "Go in there with the confidence of the man who saved my life. Where's the guy who single handedly held a collapsing building over his head? Huh? Where's the guy who has had more near death experiences than I can keep track of? You *never* give up. Go in there with that confidence, and all they'll see is a boyish looking man."

Isaac hates to admit it, but Allison's words are starting to get to him. Still, he argues, "Or a stupid teenager pretending to be a man."

"Would a stupid teenager be able to escape his abusive father without resorting to violence? You could have killed him, but you rose above that. Isaac, you're the strongest person I know. *You* can do this," Allison says. She sounds so certain, so confident.

Isaac can't argue with fact. Allison is right, he *has* done all of those things. Even after all that has changed, even after everything that has happened, Isaac still has a hard time seeing himself as one of the good guys. But Allison is right. If Isaac is anything, he's resilient. He's stubborn.

Isaac can do this.

"Okay," Isaac says, nodding. "I'm ready."

Isaac puts together the finishing touches. He tucks his shirt into his pants, dons the flashy sunglasses, and takes the bag holding the gun case. He still feels like he's wearing a costume, but if he can play the part well enough, this might just work.

Isaac walks into the warehouse with his head held high. He lets Allison's words fill him up, lets himself feel powerful in a way that he never has. He lets himself feel cocky in a way he has only ever pretended to be. He thinks of everything he's achieved, of how far he's come, and lets it turn him arrogant, if only for a few hours.

Isaac takes the sunglasses off with a smirk on his lips.

“Gentleman,” he says, voice low and exuding a haughtiness it’s never held before. “I believe Mr. Katashi is expecting me.”

“I’m expecting you,” a deep, low voice booms through the warehouse. Isaac looks up to see a man of giant stature at the top of the stairs. He might even be bigger than Ennis was.

As the man walks down the stairs, Isaac takes notice of the clawed hand gripping the banister. He doesn’t even try to hide it. It’s... unexpected. Argent hadn’t said anything about Katashi having a werewolf in his ranks, but the evidence is staring Isaac in the face. One large hand carries a briefcase while the other trails claws along the banister, scraping over the metal without a hint of subtlety.

Well, Isaac will just have to improvise. Besides, the plan remains the same: stall him.

The man walks up to the table in the middle of the otherwise barren room, slamming the briefcase down and introducing himself as Kincaid.

Isaac takes a more careful approach. He sets his own bag down on the table, taking his time in removing the gun. It has since been transferred into a smaller, wooden box. Isaac takes care to set the box down gently.

Slowly, Isaac opens the box, revealing the antique gun. He begins, “What we’re looking at here is a mint-condition French Flintlock Turnover Pistol.” He looks between Kincaid and the gun, gesturing at it, and saying, “Crafted in the mid-seventeenth century. It was a gift from Louis XIV to a prominent French family.” Isaac, feeling more and more confident in his presentation, lets a small smirk slink across his features. “It’s only been fired once.”

“During a duel between brothers,” Kincaid says, voice composed and still shockingly deep. “On the grounds of the Palace of Versailles.”

“S-So you’re familiar with it,” Isaac stammers. He only remembers so much from the notes. Maybe there was a mention of two brothers, but he can’t be sure. Isaac should have expected Katashi’s men to be briefed on the backstory. Isaac had been depending on the men being just as clueless as he is, but it seems luck isn’t on his side. (*When is it ever?*) The fake confidence will only take Isaac so far if he’s dealing with an actual gun expert.

“Oh, Mr. Katashi knows what he wants,” Kincaid says. “We’ll take it.” He opens his briefcase, showcasing more money than Isaac has ever seen in his life. “\$150,000.”

This is going so much quicker than Isaac had anticipated. The deal has only just begun, but it’s already coming to a close. Isaac’s just supposed to be stalling, not becoming the most efficient salesman ever seen. Isaac tries to stay steady, thinking on his feet. He looks at the large selection of bills, and says, “I’m gonna need to count it.”

“Oh, really?” Kincaid says, like he’s surprised by Isaac’s audacity.

“Yeah,” Isaac whispers. He reaches into the bag of supplies Argent gave him, pulling out a money counting machine. Isaac takes the first stack of bills, removes the paper strip, and slots the stack into the machine. Isaac meets Kincaid’s eyes, holding firm as the machine rapidly flicks through the bills. It won’t buy Isaac much time, but it’s something.

Isaac makes it two-thirds of the way through counting the money before something goes wrong. He’s reaching for the next stack when Kincaid suddenly beats him to the punch. He slaps the briefcase closed, stopping Isaac in his tracks. Immediately, his nerves start to flare again.

“You don’t know the whole story behind this gun, do you?” Kincaid taunts. “There was no duel between brothers. That was the cover story. The real one involves an encounter in the woods with a vicious animal.” Kincaid rounds the table, sliding his claws along the surface as he goes. “Its bite caused one of the men to change into something...” He clicks his tongue. “Monstrous.” Kincaid steps closer and closer to Isaac, fueling his anxiety. “By his family’s code, the brother of this man killed him with this very gun.”

Argent couldn’t have picked a gun with a peaceful story? Do any of his guns have a history that isn’t full of violence?

“Well, that is certainly better than the version that I heard,” Isaac says, faltering. Knowing that his facade is crumbling, he tries to make his escape. “I’m gonna trust you guys with the money here and, uh...” Isaac reaches for the briefcase, but the werewolf grabs his wrist, forcing him still.

“Personally,” Kincaid says, tightening his grip on Isaac, claws digging into his skin, “I’d like to hear your story.”

Isaac is out of options. So, when Kincaid pulls his wrist back, Isaac greets him with a glowing eyed, fang filled growl.

Kincaid growls back, eyes turning a piercing blue. Isaac tries to fight the werewolf off, but he doesn't stand a chance. Isaac usually relies on his speed in situations like this one, but, at such a close proximity, it won't do him any good. Kincaid is much bigger than Isaac, easily overpowering him in a fight based on strength.

Still, Isaac doesn't go down easily. He kicks and pulls and bites, giving it his all. Though, soon enough, there's a clawed hand poised over his throat. Isaac stills. He doesn't doubt this man's ability and willingness to follow through on a threat.

And so, Kincaid marches Isaac through the building, using one hand to keep Isaac's arms pinned to his back while the other remains over his throat. It's not a loose hold, either. It's tight and threatening, just barely constricting Isaac's airflow. Isaac can feel the tips of his claws tickling his skin, promising danger.

"Guys?" Isaac calls out as soon as he catches a glimpse of the Argents. With claws still dangerously close to his jugular, Isaac announces, "They have a werewolf too."

Isaac is steered inside a room where Allison and Argent are speaking with a man who Isaac can only presume to be Katashi. Inside, the light is starting to fade as darkness descends. The sun is already setting.

Argent steps up to the table, pulling out the covered mask of the shadow man. He sets it down on the table, slowly unwrapping the cloth. This is their last big play. If this doesn't work, they're not just out of moves, they're out of time too.

Katashi watches as the last pieces of the shattered mask are unveiled. His recognition is plain as the day that's disappearing around them.

"Starting to remember?" Argent prompts. "It was twenty-four years ago."

Katashi turns to Kincaid, giving a curt nod. Isaac is abruptly released from Kincaid's clutches. He quietly gasps for air, pulling it into his lungs as his airway fully opens once more.

"You know what they are, don't you?" Argent asks, watching Katashi closely as he rearranges the pieces of the mask. Katashi slots them together like a puzzle, forming the disturbing image of the shadow

men's faces.

"They're called oni. They are demons. And they are unstoppable," Katashi says.

Demons. That's great.

Argent presses ahead, staying focused, "Nothing is unstoppable. They have to have a weakness. Something must work on them."

"Nothing. At least no man-made weapon," Katashi lifts his head, looking up from the mask. "The oni are a force of nature. You don't fight a tsunami. You *endure* it... and you hope that you are not destroyed in its path."

Isaac doesn't like the sound of that. Tsunamis leave destruction in their wake. Maybe they can survive this, but not without a depth of collateral damage. Not without cost.

"Then how do we endure it?" Allison asks.

"One of you already has," Katashi says, turning his attention over to Isaac. He walks over to him, not hesitating before roughly turning Isaac's head, revealing the mark behind his ear. "This is Japanese kanji for 'self'. This means he is still himself."

Katashi lets go, and Isaac swiftly turns his head, tracking his next movement. He wishes people would stop grabbing him at random. It ignites a flame of panic within him every time.

"The oni are looking for one who is no longer themselves," Katashi says.

"What do you mean no longer themselves?" Argent asks. Katashi, like most people in this town, is frustratingly vague. He doesn't offer up the information willingly. They have to pry it out of him with question after question. Isaac hates it.

"Possessed," Katashi says, "by a dark spirit."

"A kitsune," Argent says. Softly, like he isn't quite sure.

"Yes," Katashi confirms. He starts to pace. "There are thirteen kinds of kitsune. Celestial, wild, ocean, thunder." Katashi stops, not taking the next step. He looks right at Argent and Allison. "But there is one. A dark kitsune." His stare is intense. His voice, too. Everything about

Katashi is intense. "They call it void. Or nogitsune."

"The kumicho," Argent says, catching on.

"That's right. He was possessed by a nogitsune. It's what helped him rise through the ranks of our yakuza family. Nogitsune draws its power from pain and tragedy, strife and chaos," Katashi explains.

There's a pause. All three of them are hanging onto Katashi's every word, searching for insight and hidden meanings. Katashi continues, seeming to shift focus, he holds up his silver pinky. "Do you know why I'm missing this finger?"

"Penance," Argent says. Isaac doesn't see how this is relevant, but, still, he listens closely. Katashi doesn't strike Isaac as the type of man to waste their time with pointless stories. He seems to choose each word carefully, speaking in slow, fragmented phrases.

"There's a ritual called yubitsume," Katashi says. "Removing the joints of the little finger weakens your grip on a sword. When a katana is gripped properly, the little finger is the strongest."

"Why did they take your finger?" Isaac asks, trying to push the conversation along, to get to the heart of the message. The sun has set. They don't have time for parables or riddles.

"They didn't take it," Katashi says, looking at Isaac. "A yakuza performs the ritual himself and offers it to his superior. It was penance for a mistake, and it wasn't my only one..."

It seems a bit extreme in Isaac's opinion, but, looking at his past, he's not in a position to judge the punishments of others.

Katashi turns to face the window. He continues, speaking quietly, "I don't know what it was about the way I moved or stood that suggested to them that I was going to take them on because actually I was... preparing to run for my life." Katashi slowly spins back around, meeting Argent with that same intense stare. "That shot you fired saved me from looking like a coward before the survivors. For that humiliation, I wouldn't have to have given up my finger. I would've had to give up my head."

Katashi refolds the wrappings over the broken mask, concealing it. Argent stands. Katashi bows towards him, pushing the mask back across the table. "I wish I could give you the answer you need, Mr. Argent. I owe you more than my life... I owe you my honor."

Katashi looks down, almost like he's trying to signal the end of the discussion. Argent doesn't budge. He holds his position, waiting Katashi out.

Katashi raises his head, and says, "I will tell you one thing, however. If there is a nogitsune among you... let the oni destroy it." His eyes flick over to Allison. It's a pointed, intentional stare. "Even if it is your own daughter."

With that, the conversation draws to a close.

Isaac, Allison, and Argent rush out of the building, returning to the now dark parking lot.

"Call Scott," Isaac says at once. "There's no way he's the dark spirit. He'll be fine."

There's no doubt in Isaac's mind that it's the truth. Scott isn't the dark kitsune. It's not even a possibility.

Allison nods in agreement, already pulling out her phone. She quickly dials Scott's number, letting it ring only once before Scott answers. Isaac focuses his super-hearing, tuning into the conversation and listening intently.

"Allison, please tell me that you have something. They're here. They're trying to get in, and it looks like they're going to be able to do it," Scott says in a rush.

"Okay, okay listen," Allison says. "They're Japanese demons. They're called the oni. They're looking for someone possessed. Someone with a dark spirit attached to them."

"A *nogitsune*," Scott says. Isaac's eyebrows lift in surprise.

"How'd you know that?" Allison asks, mirroring Isaac's own thoughts. When Scott doesn't answer, Allison presses, "Scott?"

"Just... uh, tell me what else," Scott says, ignoring the question.

"Okay, they won't hurt you. They know you're supernatural, but once they do this check, once they realize you're not carrying with you this dark spirit, then they won't hurt you. I promise. All they're looking for is a nogitsune," Allison says, explaining everything as succinctly as possible.

Then, Scott hangs up without saying anything else.

A pause falls over the group. From an outsider's perspective, this might appear to be a massive gamble, but it's not. It's a calculated move. They know Scott. They know he's not possessed. There's just no way.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Argent says, and they all pile into the car again.

Argent drives to the McCall house first, planning to drop Isaac off. There, in the driveway, Isaac glances down at the borrowed suit. Argent notices his hesitation and says, "Just keep it."

Isaac nods, too worn out to protest. He exits the car with a soft thank you and quiet goodbye. Argent waits until Isaac gets to the porch, then he backs out of the driveway, leaving it void of any cars. It makes Isaac feel uneasy. Last they heard, everyone was here.

Isaac enters the household. Without power or people, the house is dark and still.

Out of nowhere, Derek steps out of the blackness.

"Derek!" Isaac yelps, jumping in his surprise.

Derek immediately starts to laugh at Isaac. At first, because of his pathetic reaction, but then, because, "Oh my god. What are you wearing?"

Isaac looks down at himself. He looks even more ridiculous than he did before. With his tie removed and shirt untucked, Isaac looks rumpled and disheveled. He looks like a boy playing dress up.

Isaac sighs, running his fingers through his hair, "It's a long story just... what are you doing here? Where is everyone?" By which, Isaac means: *where's Scott?*

"Home or the hospital, mostly. Scott's dad got hurt in the fight against the oni, but he should be okay," Derek explains.

"And Scott?" Isaac asks.

"He's fine. The oni marked him, but you guys were right. They didn't hurt him," Derek says. He looks like he knows something Isaac doesn't. It's annoying.

“So what are you doing here?” Isaac asks. Derek doesn’t usually show up unannounced without reason.

“Can’t I just want to check in on my beta?” Derek asks, though his voice indicates he knows it’s not enough.

“We’re both betas now,” Isaac points out. He doesn’t know why he says it, but it feels important.

“Maybe, but you were still my first beta,” Derek says, like this is important too.

And it’s true, to a certain extent. Technically, Jackson was supposed to be Derek’s first beta, but that didn’t exactly work out. Regardless, Isaac doesn’t mention that because he knows what Derek is trying to say. Derek might not be an alpha anymore and Erica and Boyd might be dead, but Isaac was still turned by Derek’s bite. They’re still pack.

Eventually, Derek says, “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Okay,” Isaac says, feeling a little nervous. “What is it?”

“Well, I... I was thinking, you might want to move back in with me,” Derek suggests, speaking slow and timid, but genuine nonetheless. Of all the things Isaac could have anticipated, this definitely wasn’t one of them. Derek must see the surprise on Isaac’s face because he adds, “I know I messed up last time.”

“Big time,” Isaac interjects.

Derek nods, “Yeah, I messed up big time, but... things are different now, right? I – *I’m* different now. I think it could be better. I have no plans to leave Beacon Hills anytime soon, and it could... the loft could be like a proper home for you. I’ll even get you an actual bed too.” Derek trails off, then, “Don’t say anything right now just... think about it.”

Never before has Isaac ever heard Derek’s speech so discombobulated. It’s a testament to how important this must be to him, how important *Isaac* is to him. Isaac is caught off guard and surprised, but Derek is nervous. It’s a sight to behold.

“Yeah, I’ll – I’ll think about it,” Isaac agrees with a small smile.

“Okay. That’s... good,” Derek says disjointedly.

They make quite the pair. Two emotionally stunted people trying to find their place with each other, trying to talk about their actual feelings. It's awkward and embarrassing, but Derek's right. It's good. Things are good.

Before he leaves, Derek turns to Isaac and says, "You really do look ridiculous. Seriously, whose is that? Are you wearing Chris Argent's suit, right now?"

Isaac doesn't warrant that with a response. Instead, he just flips Derek off.

After that, Isaac goes upstairs to change. He doesn't want anyone else seeing him in this stupid suit. Besides, it's horribly uncomfortable. Isaac changes into sweatpants and a t-shirt, and then he waits. He could easily just go to sleep, he's certainly tired enough, but he wants to wait up for Scott. He wants to reconnect.

While he waits, Isaac thinks about Derek's offer. He feels torn. On one hand, Isaac likes living at the McCall house. Things are so nice here, but, even after a month of living here, Isaac still feels like a guest. It's not Melissa or Scott's fault by any means, but the two of them are such a tight unit. Isaac knows they genuinely care about him, but he just doesn't truly feel like he belongs. It doesn't feel like home.

On the other hand, Derek's loft has a messy history. It's the place where Isaac watched Boyd get murdered, it's the place where Derek kicked Isaac to the curb. But it's also the place where Derek saved Isaac's life. The loft never felt like home for Isaac either, but so much has changed since then. Derek has changed. He's still the same person, of course, but he's stopped chasing power. He's stepped into his role as a protector of Beacon Hills. He's become much more open and honest.

Derek is the closest thing Isaac has to a family. He's his anchor, his pack.

Isaac trusts Derek and his intentions, but it still makes him nervous. To give that much of his trust to one person... It scares Isaac, and for good reason. Isaac doesn't have a good track record, and Derek's mistakes are part of that.

So, Isaac feels torn.

Before Isaac gets a chance to fully wrap his head around it all, he hears the front door open. He easily recognizes the footfall as Scott's,

so Isaac gets out of bed, moving towards the doorway. He steps out into the hallway, watching Scott come up the stairs.

Scott smiles when he sees him. He looks tired, but the happiness in his eyes is real. “Hey, I didn’t know you were back.”

“Yeah, I got here a little while ago.” Isaac says. “How’s your – How’s your dad?”

“He’ll be okay, probably discharged tomorrow morning,” Scott says. Then, “How’d you know about that?”

Scott gestures for Isaac to follow him, so he does, letting Scott lead the way into his bedroom. Scott flops down on his bed, knees bent over the edge, but back flat against the mattress. He heaves a big sigh, staying there for a moment before resurfacing. He sits up, still smiling softly, and pats the spot next to him.

Isaac joins him on the bed. Scott raises his eyebrows expectantly, reminding Isaac of the question asked of him.

“Oh, uh. Derek told me,” Isaac says, rubbing the back of his neck. “He was waiting here for me, I guess.”

“You guess?” Scott teases.

“Okay, not a guess, he was,” Isaac says, sheepish.

Scott’s soft smile blossoms into a bright grin. “I’m glad things are better between you and Derek now. I’ve known Derek awhile, but I’ve never seen him like this. He’s so... present.”

It’s the perfect word to describe Derek’s transformation. Derek has come into himself. He’s no longer the withdrawn, distant alpha. It’s like he’s stepped into the light.

“So, I’m guessing Derek told you about the oni? They marked me and Kira,” Scott says, showing the symbol behind his ear.

“Katashi told us it’s the Japanese kanji for self,” Isaac says. Then, realizing what Scott said, he blurts out, “Wait. Kira?”

“She’s a kitsune,” Scott says. Isaac’s eyes widen in alarm, so Scott quickly tacks on, “But they checked her. She’s not the nogitsune.”

Isaac wants to believe Scott, but he’s hesitant. “You’re sure?”

Scott nods, “A hundred percent. She’s not evil.”

Scott is a hard person to argue with, he speaks with such conviction. Isaac lets his hesitancy simmer, but doesn’t let go of it entirely. With someone like Scott leading the charge, it’s good to take things with a grain of salt. Isaac is just watching Scott’s back, checking his blindspots.

“So, um, what’s going on with you and Kira?” Isaac asks, phrasing the question the same way Scott did when he asked about Isaac and Allison.

Scott looks surprised, spluttering. “She – uh – she’s cool, but I don’t think either of us are looking to be anything more than friends.”

Isaac wants to ask if that’s because of Allison, but he thinks that might be a line Scott doesn’t want him to cross. So, Isaac just nods. “Cool.”

They sit in silence for a moment. It’s a comfortable thing, but something is tearing at Isaac’s mind. He has to ask. “Do you really think there could be a nogitsune among us?”

“I don’t... I don’t know,” Scott says. “I – Yeah, I don’t know.”

Isaac can tell there’s something Scott’s not telling him. Whether it’s to protect Isaac or someone else, he isn’t sure, but Isaac knows Scott’s holding back. He’s hiding something. Isaac wants to press, but it’s not in his nature. He can’t bring himself to do it. Instead, he says, “It just doesn’t make sense. Why would the oni come here if no one was possessed?”

Scott hums. “Maybe it’s because of the nemeton. Deaton said it would draw supernatural creatures to Beacon Hills. Maybe they’re here by mistake.”

It’s a nice thought, to think that the oni are just passing through, but Isaac doesn’t quite buy it. He has a feeling Scott doesn’t either. Still, Isaac doesn’t push.

Isaac starts to run through everything he learned today, trying to commit each fact to memory. One piece of the puzzle stands out to Isaac, drawing his attention. With a start, Isaac realizes it could be their biggest clue yet. Without preamble, Isaac says, “The oni only check people with a connection to the supernatural, right?”

“Yeah,” Scott says slowly, not following Isaac’s train of thought.

“Then who’s left?” Isaac asks. “Who hasn’t been checked?”

Scott sits up a little straighter, now understanding what Isaac is getting at. Of the supernatural people they know, almost everyone has already come in contact with the oni.

“Malia,” Scott says, thinking out loud. “She might not have been checked yet.”

Isaac nods. He doesn’t want to say it, but he remembers what Derek told him this morning. He sighs, “Peter is back in town.”

“I didn’t even know he left,” Scott says, almost laughing.

If the majority of the supernatural people they know have already passed the oni’s test, then the nogitsune – if there is one – is most likely a stranger. The thought settles something in Isaac, causing an unexpected wave of calm to run through him.

That is, until a petrifying thought crosses his mind. It chills Isaac to the bone.

“Could – Can the nogitsune possess a human?” Isaac asks, putting voice to his concern.

Scott looks right at Isaac, and lies, “I don’t think so.”

Scott’s heart rate does a little jump. He knows more than he wants to let on. He has a theory, Isaac can tell. He just isn’t ready to share it.

Or he doesn’t trust Isaac enough to share it with him specifically.

Isaac feels a small sting of hurt. He lets it run its course, rippling through his body, and then he lets it go. Scott might not trust Isaac fully, but Isaac trusts him. He trusts Scott’s judgment.

“Okay, well,” Isaac says, making to get up. “We should try to get some sleep.”

Scott nods. “You’re lucky you didn’t have to go to school today. I haven’t slept since before the party.”

Isaac winces, and says, “I took a nap on Allison’s couch.”

“You’re always sleeping on someone’s couch,” Scott says, tone light and poking fun. It makes Isaac smile.

Isaac shakes his head a little, and says with a touch of laughter, “Good night.”

“Good night, Isaac.”

Isaac doesn't mention Derek's offer. Not out of spite, and not because Isaac wants to keep it a secret, he's just scared. He's scared of how Scott will react. He could be offended or he might even be relieved, desperate to get rid of Isaac. Isaac isn't sure which is worse, but until he has some sense of what he's going to do, he can't risk either outcome. So, he doesn't say a word about it. He just turns and walks back to the guest bedroom.

Isaac doesn't want to show Scott his cards. Not until he knows what his next play is. For now, Isaac will hold them close to his chest. He'll reveal his hand when he's ready. No sooner and no later.

Riddled

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 18

Word count: 8,531

“Isaac!”

Isaac wakes to the sound of Scott’s voice shouting his name. It travels down the hallway into the guest bedroom, tone flooded with desperation and panic. Isaac immediately sits bolt upright.

“Isaac, get up! I need your help!”

Isaac races out of bed, getting tangled in his sheets as he does. Isaac kicks his legs free, stumbling down the hallway. There’s anxiety coursing through his veins now. Whatever has Scott yelling like that can’t be good.

“Isaac!”

Isaac bursts through Scott’s door, unsteady on his feet. “Wh – What’s wrong?”

Isaac can hear the fear in his own voice, but he’s more focused on Scott. Scott is dressed half in pajamas, half in day clothes. He’s frantic. He’s scrambling around, grabbing things off his desk. “It’s Stiles,” Scott says, tossing Isaac his extra motorcycle helmet. “Get dressed.”

Isaac, despite his sleep-addled state, catches the helmet with ease. Isaac doesn’t move, not yet. Not until he knows more. “What’s wrong with Stiles?”

Scott stills. He’s leaning over his dresser, shoulders heaving with the heaviness of his breathing. He slowly turns his gaze, properly looking at Isaac for the first time throughout the entire exchange. There’s terror in his eyes and his voice almost breaks when he says, “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” Isaac asks.

“He called and he – he didn’t know where he was, but his leg was stuck and – Isaac, I don’t know, we just have to find him. Please,”

Scott says, almost begging. There's so much emotion in his voice. Isaac can hardly stand it.

"Okay," Isaac says easily. "I'll get dressed."

Isaac runs back to the guest room, tearing open his chest of drawers and grabbing the first items of clothing he can get his hands on. Isaac moves quickly, tugging on a pullover and trading out his sweats for a pair of jeans. He slips into his sneakers, forcing his feet in without undoing the laces. He struggles for a moment with the left shoe, cursing as he jumps to maintain balance. Once his heel finally slips inside, Isaac picks up the discarded helmet and rejoins Scott.

With both boys set to go, Scott and Isaac rush towards the door, ready to embark into the night. Just as they're barreling down the stairs, Scott's phone starts to vibrate. He scrambles to answer it, dropping his helmet in the flurry of panic and haste.

"Hey, Stiles," Scott answers in a single breath.

"Did you call him?" Stiles' voice is so quiet that, even with werewolf hearing, Isaac has to stand right next to Scott to listen in. *"Did you call my dad?"*

"No. Just Isaac. We're coming to find you," Scott says. Then, "Can you figure out where you are? Try to find something and tell us where to look."

"It's a basement," Stiles says. There's some sort of interference coming through the phone. A crackling sound, like the reception is breaking in and out. *"I think... I think I'm in some kind of – some kind of basement."*

"In a house?" Scott asks. He looks just as confused as Isaac feels. Stiles' words are hushed and barely coherent. He's not making much sense.

"No. It looks bigger. Like industrial," Stiles says. His voice is thick, sounding wet, almost like he's been crying. He's scared. The phone crackles again. *"I think there's a furnace. But it – it's cold. It's freezing down here. I–"* Each word is said so softly, Isaac really has to strain to hear now. *"I gotta turn the... I gotta turn the phone off, Scott. It's gonna die."*

"Wait, wait, wait," Scott says not loud in volume but with distress. They need more information. If Stiles turns his phone off now, they'll have next to nothing to work with. They need more. "What else is

there? What do you see?”

“The phone’s dying. I can’t talk,” Stiles says. Then, even quieter still, *“I have to go... Please—”*

“Stiles, why are you whispering?” Scott asks. The question sparks a feeling of unease in Isaac, but he tries to stay above it. Scott is already freaked out enough for the both of them, Isaac can smell it coming off of him in waves. Isaac has to stay unemotional.

Stiles’ next breath comes through the speaker, shaky and loud. His voice quivers when he says, *“Because I think there’s someone in here with me.”*

And then, the line disconnects.

Silence falls over Scott and Isaac. For a moment, they just stand there, letting Stiles’ final words wash over them. The threat looms overhead, its shadow growing bigger and darker with each passing second.

Scott takes a deep breath, filling his lungs. He squares his shoulders and clenches his jaw. His chemosignals start to shift. When he speaks, there’s no trace of fear, only fierce determination, “We have to find him.”

“Where do we start?” Isaac asks, staying focused. He doesn’t voice any of his concerns. There’s no need, not when Scott is so obviously feeling them too. The best thing Isaac can do, for Stiles and Scott, is buckle down and help.

“His house. We can get something with his scent,” Scott says. He pauses. Then, admits, “He also – He might still be there.”

“At his house?” Isaac speaks before thinking, not quite understanding at first. But then, when he gives it a moment of consideration, the pieces fall together. “It could be a nightmare.”

It makes sense, really. Stiles could be asleep in his bed right now, tormented by nightmares but physically well. Or he sleepwalked into an industrial basement. The former certainly sounds more plausible.

Regardless, Stiles needs their help, so Scott and Isaac gather their helmets and rush out the door. Isaac climbs on the back of Scott’s motorcycle with practiced ease. They tear down the streets, ignoring stop signs and speed limits. It’s a wonder Scott hasn’t been arrested.

They pull up outside the Stilinski household in a record four and a half minutes. They don't stop even for a second, they just keep running. Scott uses his own key to unlock the front door, letting them inside. Scott immediately books it down the hall towards Stiles' bedroom with the familiarity of someone who has spent their whole life here, with Stiles.

Scott opens the door to Stiles' bedroom, revealing an unexpected sight. Stiles is nowhere to be found, but Lydia and one of the twins – presumably Aiden – are standing in the middle of the room. (If Isaac was less worried about Stiles, he might be angered by the twin's presence. For now, he can't spare even a drop of his energy. All of it has to go towards Stiles and his safety.)

"How did you know? Did he call you too?" Scott asks Lydia, not wasting a second.

"I heard it," Lydia says, eyes wide and expression spooked.

"Don't ask," Aiden says, he's looking at Isaac. "It gets more confusing when you ask."

Believing it, Isaac mouths *okay* but doesn't actually say anything.

"Not as confusing as this," Lydia says, turning to face the expanse of Stiles' room.

Isaac has only been in Stiles' bedroom once before, but it certainly didn't look like this at the time. There's a pair of big, metal scissors stabbed into the head of Stiles' mattress, right where the pillow is supposed to go. The oddity doesn't end there, though. Tied to the scissors are dozens of strings, all pulled taut and pinned to different sections of the evidence board mapped out across the wall.

"He uses red for unsolved cases," Lydia says.

There are only red strings.

"Maybe he thinks he's part of an unsolved case?" Aiden says.

"Or *is* an unsolved case," Isaac mutters, unable to hold back his negativity. The deeper they dive, the more bizarre all of this becomes. With each layer they pull back, the outcome gets less and less ideal. There's something *wrong* with Stiles. Something beyond sleepwalking.

"Wait," Lydia says, rounding on Scott and Isaac. "Is he still out there?"

Her voice is accusatory, but Isaac doesn't take it personally. It's just misplaced worry. "You don't know where he is?"

"He said he was in an industrial basement somewhere," Scott says, and, really, that's it. That's all they have to go on. It's barely a lead, it's barely anything at all.

"We came here to get a better scent," Isaac explains.

"What else did he say?" Lydia asks.

"Something's wrong with his leg. It's – It's bleeding," Scott says.

"And he's freezing," Isaac adds, recounting the phone call.

"Tonight's the coldest night of the year. It's going to drop into the twenties," Aiden says. As if they don't already know that. As if he actually cares.

Isaac takes a breath, forcing himself to set aside his anger. If Aiden wants to pretend to care, they should let him. As much as Isaac might not want to admit it, they could use all the help they can get right now. Stiles could be anywhere.

"What did his dad say?" Lydia asks. She's speaking quietly, voice just above a whisper, almost a breath.

"We kind of... We didn't tell him yet," Scott admits.

"Stiles is bleeding and freezing and you didn't call his dad?" Lydia questions, volume returning to her voice. The anger is back too, but, honestly, it's well founded.

"He – He made me promise not to," Scott says, sounding decently chastened. "We can find him by scent. If he was sleepwalking, he couldn't have gotten far, right?"

Scott glances over at Isaac. Isaac wants to agree with Scott, he really does, but something bigger is going on here. Something bad is happening. Now might not be the best time to worry about keeping a promise, not if it puts Stiles at higher risk.

"You guys didn't notice his Jeep is gone, did you?" Aiden asks. The words drop fear into Isaac's stomach. It's like a weight, tugging him down.

Lydia pulls her phone out, already dialing. "You promised you

wouldn't call his dad. I didn't."

"Wait, Lydia, hold on," Scott pleads. "I can get more help. I can call Derek, Allison..."

Isaac doesn't fully understand why this is so important to Scott. Yes, Scott is all about keeping his word, but there is a time and a place. Sometimes, morals have to be sacrificed. They need to choose their battles and, this time, Stiles' life is on the line. Surely, that's more important than any moral dilemma.

"Everyone except for the cops! Great idea," Lydia says, dripping in sarcasm.

"You guys remember she only gets these feelings when someone is about to die, right?" Aiden presses.

There's a pause.

Isaac watches Scott. He watches as his conviction drains. He watches as Scott swallows down his remaining protests. He watches as Scott gives in. He says, "You don't have to call his dad. It's five minutes to the station."

Scott and Isaac turn to leave. Aiden makes to follow them, but Lydia sticks her hand out, stopping him. "We'll catch up," she says.

Isaac and Scott come to a halt in the doorway. Scott steps back into the room, asking her, "What? Why?"

"There is *something* here," Lydia says.

"Yeah," Isaac says, eyes darting around the room, taking in each and every abnormality. Isaac hands his attention over to Scott, looking at him pointedly. Then, not to be cruel, but because he's worried and doesn't know what to do with the feeling, he says, "Evidence of total insanity."

Again, Isaac watches Scott. He watches Scott purposely avoid his gaze. He watches Scott's mouth open and close, like he has something to say, but doesn't have the courage to do so. He watches Scott fumble.

"We can figure out what's wrong with him *after* we find a way to keep him from freezing to death," Scott says.

"Go," Lydia says, frustration already drained from her voice. "We'll be

right behind you.”

And so, Scott and Isaac make their way to the police station, following the traffic laws more closely this time. When they dismount the bike, Scott turns to Isaac, and asks, “Can you call Derek and Allison while I talk to Stiles’ dad? I think we’re gonna need more help.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay,” Isaac says, nodding and trying to be reassuring. Scott has turned subdued. The fight is still there, but the hope isn’t.

Scott turns to walk away. Isaac wants to call out to him, wants to offer better support, but he doesn’t.

Instead, Isaac sets down the spare helmet and pulls out his phone. He calls Derek first.

“Isaac?” Derek picks up after the third ring, voice rough with sleep but full of concern. “What’s wrong?”

“Stiles is missing,” Isaac says. “You need to come help.”

“Wait. What? What happened? Isaac, what’s going on?” Derek asks. There’s movement on the other line, like he’s frantically moving around.

“Stiles called Scott a little while ago. He’s – Stiles thinks he’s in an industrial basement somewhere. His leg is bleeding and it’s freezing and his Jeep is missing and Lydia–”

“Isaac,” Derek’s voice cuts through his rambling. “Slow down for a second. Take your time. Tell me what happened.” Isaac wants to protest, wants to argue that there’s no time, Stiles is out there right now, but Derek’s voice repeats, “Slow down. Take a breath. Rushing isn’t going to help.”

Isaac listens. He inhales through his nose. The breath is shaky, nowhere near close to calm, but it settles him. Isaac does it again. He thinks of Derek. His hand on Isaac’s, pulling pain from his body. His offer for Isaac to move back in. His proud smile, the one reserved just for Isaac.

Isaac’s body relaxes. Slower, Isaac says, “Stiles called Scott. He said he was somewhere in an industrial basement. His leg is stuck so he can’t get out. We went to Stiles’ house to get a better lock on his scent, but Lydia and Aiden were already there. Lydia heard something – the phone call, I guess – and his Jeep is gone and, and.” Isaac breathes

again. “And now, we’re at the sheriff’s station.”

“Okay. I’ll meet you there, all right?” Derek asks. Isaac can hear the shakiness in Derek’s own breathing, but his voice comes out calm. He’s covering his own fear for Isaac’s sake. It’s nice.

“All right.” Isaac says. He wants to linger on the line, but doesn’t. Instead, he hangs up and quickly calls Allison.

The phone rings and rings and rings. Allison doesn’t pick up.

Isaac tries not to let it worry him, tells himself Allison is likely sleeping. She just didn’t hear her phone.

Isaac tries her again. With each subsequent ring, his heart rate starts to rise. Isaac holds his breath, begging Allison to pick up.

She doesn’t.

Isaac’s hands are starting to shake. His thumbs fumble over the buttons as he dials one more time.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Nothing.

Isaac, frustrated, types out a text message instead: **Stiles is missing. Need your help. Call me.**

It’s the best Isaac can do for now. He shoves his phone back in his pocket, ensuring that its sound is on, and then he enters the station.

There, Isaac finds Scott speaking to Sheriff Stilinski. He must have only just finished explaining what happened because the sheriff seems to be grappling with the onslaught of news. Truthfully, it’s hard to watch. The sheriff is leaning forward, hands pressed to the desk. His breathing is shallow and his eyes are wet. The smell of hurt and fear are pungent. “*Come on,*” he whispers to himself.

Then, with an efficiency that only comes with experience, he swallows and regains his composure. Stilinski stands, addressing Scott, “If his Jeep is gone, that’s where we start.”

Stilinski turns to the deputies, saying, “Parrish, let’s get an APB out on a blue 1980 CJ-5 Jeep.” Then, “Cordova, I want a list of any kind of industrial basement or sub-level of any building that he could’ve gotten into while sleepwalking.”

Next, Stilinski raises his voice, addressing the entire room. “It’s the

coldest night of the year so far, so if he's out there barefoot in just a t-shirt, he could already be hypothermic. Let's move fast. Let's think fast."

"The two of you, come with me," Stilinski says quieter, speaking to Isaac and Scott. He ushers the pair into his office, making a point of closing the door behind him. "Okay. Is there anything you need to tell me that I can't tell everyone out there?"

"Lydia knew he was missing," Scott says. It means something, they just aren't sure what that is yet.

"Can she help find him?" Stilinski asks.

"Well, she's working on it," Isaac says. As of right now, they don't really know what Lydia is capable of. She knows and hears things, things nobody else does, but she can't turn it on. It's hit or miss. She *could* help, she *wants* to help, but they can't rely on that. There's too much uncertainty.

"Anything else?" Sheriff Stilinski asks, looking from Isaac over to Scott.

"Isaac called Derek and Allison for help," Scott says.

"All right, can – can you find him by scent?" Stilinski says, hushed and unsure. He's still so new to all of this.

Before Isaac or Scott can answer, there's a knock on the door. The younger deputy, Parrish, steps inside. "We got it, sir. We found the Jeep."

Well, that was fast. Isaac ignores the gut feeling of *too fast*.

The Jeep is at the hospital. As soon as the location is known, the commotion commences. Everyone starts rushing out the door, desperate to get to Beacon Memorial as quickly as possible.

In the mayhem, Isaac spares a single moment to fire off a text to Derek: **Jeep at hospital. Meet there.**

Then, Isaac is climbing onto the back of Scott's motorcycle for the third time that night and away they go. The hospital is close to the sheriff's station and, with the blaring police sirens leading the way, they get there in no time.

The Jeep is stationed in the hospital parking lot, but it doesn't come with the sigh of relief they were all hoping for. When Sheriff Stilinski runs up to the car, they find it empty and, "It's dead. He must have left the lights on."

The Jeep is abandoned and Stiles is nowhere to be found. The search continues.

"Why would he come here?" Scott asks.

"Let's find out," Stilinski says, closing the door to the Jeep.

Just then, Isaac gets a text from Derek: **Here. Come to the roof.**

Isaac relays the message to Scott, and the group splits. The sheriff heads inside the hospital to check the basement while Isaac and Scott rush up to the roof to unite with Derek. Isaac and Scott take the stairs two at a time, racing against the clock to meet an unknown deadline. They know time is limited, they know it's slipping away, but they don't know exactly how much they have left.

They find Derek standing on the roof, facing out towards the electrical unit. Hearing them approach, Derek says, "He's not here. Not anymore."

"You mean the whole building?" Scott asks.

"Gone," Derek says, apparently back to being vague and unhelpful. Isaac resists the urge to roll his eyes. He knows Derek well enough now to recognize this for what is. Derek is covering his own worry with ambiguity. It's frustrating, but Isaac can't fault him. They all have to do what they can to cope and remain calm.

For Isaac, that means offering practical help at every turn. So, he says, "I'll go tell Stilinski."

Scott doesn't let him go just yet, asking, "Wait. What about Allison?"

Isaac shakes his head. His phone is still radio silent. "Still nothing," he says.

Scott nods, and Isaac darts off. He races down the hospital stairs, round and round and round until he makes it down to the basement. There, he finds the sheriff, Melissa, and a handful of deputies. They must have turned up empty handed because, while they're still searching, it's half-hearted at best.

“Stiles isn’t here,” Isaac says, approaching Stilinski. “Derek says he was, but now he’s gone now. We missed him.”

Stilinski stares at Isaac. His expression morphs from fear to anger. It comes out in his voice, almost barking, “Then where the hell is my son?”

Isaac knows the anger isn’t directed at him, knows it isn’t personal. He knows that, but, still, he flinches. He can’t fight it. Something about the sheriff’s authority and the atmosphere of the basement... It’s all too familiar. Isaac takes a clumsy step backwards.

His heartbeat is rising along with his panic, but, then, Melissa McCall is standing in front of him. She places a gentle handle on Isaac’s shoulder, locking eyes with him, and says, “It’s okay, Isaac.”

She doesn’t say anything more, doesn’t make a big deal out of it, but she doesn’t need to. It’s enough. The simple words and the kind eyes lull Isaac’s anxiety. His heart rate gradually drops, returning to a normal, steady *thu-thump*.

Only when she sees Isaac calm does Melissa turn away from him, speaking to Stilinski with conviction, almost scolding, “We’re going to find him.”

The sheriff nods. He looks stricken, almost apologetic. Isaac purposely avoids his eye. He doesn’t need pity or an apology. He just needs the moment to pass.

Luckily, it does. Derek and Scott burst into the basement and any remaining tension is dismantled. Instead, it’s replaced by Scott’s focused determination. He steps into the leadership role with ease, spearheading the movement, “He’s not here, but we have to keep looking. Derek and Isaac, why don’t you go to the school? He could be in the boiler room.”

Isaac and Derek both agree. As they turn to leave, Scott says, “And if you get a chance, check on Allison.”

With their marching orders set, Derek and Isaac make their way back up the basement stairs and into the hospital parking lot. Derek’s own car is parked not too far from the still abandoned Jeep.

Inside the car, Isaac unnecessarily announces, “I’m going to try to call her again.”

Derek doesn't say anything, just starts to drive. Isaac doesn't mind.

Isaac dials Allison's number. Once again, the phone rings. It's mocking him now. Each incessant ringing sounds more taunting than the last. It's no use. Allison doesn't answer.

Isaac huffs, locking his phone and sliding it into his pocket.

"I'm sure she's just asleep. If anything was wrong, Argent would know," Derek says.

Isaac ignores him. He knows Derek is probably right, but putting it into words just feels like tempting fate.

A long moment of silence passes before Derek says, "Are you okay? It seemed kind of tense back there."

"It's a stressful situation," Isaac says. His voice is quiet and they both know he's deflecting.

Derek doesn't push though. Now isn't the time and they both know that. So, instead, Derek says, "Stiles is stubborn. He'll be okay."

Isaac's lips quirk into a small, irrepressible smile because, yeah, it's true. Stiles is stubborn. It's part of why they didn't get along for so long. Isaac made a bad first impression, and then Stiles held tight to it, refusing to let Isaac prove him wrong.

Stiles is headstrong. He's resilient. He will be okay.

When they get to the school, they don't waste any time tearing through the locks. Isaac can't help but remember the last time they were here together. It was another rescue mission, another night just like this, but, instead of Stiles, it was Boyd they were trying to save.

Don't think about Boyd.

That's when Isaac should have realized just how much Derek secretly cared about his betas. He could have easily killed Boyd in the boiler room that night, but he didn't. He let Boyd rip him to shreds instead.

Don't think about Boyd.

Isaac glances at Derek. The two of them have come to a sudden stand still, hovering outside the school, a little scared to enter. Isaac can tell Derek's mind has gone to the same dark place.

“Stop thinking about it,” Isaac says.

“Like you’re not thinking about it too?” Derek responds.

They can’t talk about this. Not now.

So, Isaac takes the plunge. He brushes past Derek, stepping inside the school hallway. It’s dark inside, but, with werewolf vision, Isaac can see clearly.

When the brief moment of rumination has been broken, the fear kicks into gear again and the pair are rushing towards the basement. It’s like there is a countdown, marking every wasted breath, every squandered second. *Tick. Tick. Tick.*

As much as Isaac wants to find Stiles within the school, he doesn’t have much faith. There’s nothing indicating Stiles will be here, but, still, they have to try. Isaac and Derek set foot inside the boiler room.

They’re met with nothing.

Isaac and Derek search high and low, but Stiles isn’t here. There’s no scent, there’s no trail, there’s no clue. There’s nothing here.

Stiles isn’t here.

Just as Isaac is starting to spiral, just as he’s starting to lose all hope, his phone rings.

Isaac doesn’t even check the caller ID, he just answers, “Hello?”

Isaac doesn’t know who he was expecting to answer. Allison, probably, but it isn’t her. It’s Scott. It’s Scott and he’s saying, “*We found him.*”

“What?” Isaac asks. The word falls out of his mouth before he can even process what’s been said.

Derek moves closer, listening in as Scott says, “*We found him, he’s okay.*” There’s emotion in his voice, but also a smile. “*Stiles is okay. They’re taking him to the hospital now.*”

Relief. It’s all Isaac can feel.

A grin spreads across Isaac’s features. “He’s okay? Where was he?”

“*Yeah, he’s okay,*” Scott says on an exhale. “*He was actually – He was*

asleep the whole time. He wasn't in a basement, he was in Malia's coyote den."

"The coyote den?" Isaac clarifies, not expecting that twist.

"Yeah, my dad, he – he figured it out. Stiles was still asleep when they found him," Scott says. Then, *"I – I have to go back to the hospital, now."*

Isaac is about to hang up when Derek gently takes the phone, saying, "Hey, Scott. Isaac and I will come help with clean up. We can jump start the Jeep."

Scott agrees, thanks them both, and then ends the call. Derek hands Isaac back his phone.

Isaac, dumb with happiness, says, "I've never jump started anything before."

Derek scoffs, it's almost a laugh. "You can just sit there and look pretty."

Isaac rolls his eyes, but he can't maintain the annoyance. He smiles, "Stiles is okay."

"Yeah," Derek nods. "He is."

There's something about the way Derek says the words, like he doesn't fully believe it to be true. It probably isn't.

They all know something bigger is going on with Stiles. They might have saved him from freezing to death, but that just means it's time to figure out what's actually *wrong* with him. Isaac has a feeling it won't be such an easy feat.

—

Aiden is standing by the Jeep. He's leaning against it, almost like he was waiting for their return.

Derek and Isaac share a look, both unsure what Aiden could want. Derek holds Isaac's gaze for two, three seconds. Then, he looks away and gets out of the car as if this is nothing out of the ordinary.

Isaac follows his lead. He rests against the passenger side of the car, observing Derek and Aiden. Derek doesn't say anything to the twin, completely ignores him, actually, as he pops the hood of his car. Then, he goes around to the trunk of the car, pulling out a set of jumper

cables. He hands them to Isaac, saying, “Hold these for a second.”

Derek keeps walking right past Aiden, intentionally and obviously disregarding his existence. It fills Isaac with a smug sort of satisfaction.

Next, Derek opens the hood of Stiles’ Jeep. He makes a small sound, one that is becoming more and more familiar to Isaac. It’s a laugh. Derek looks up at Isaac and says, quietly, “Duct tape.”

Isaac’s eyebrows lift in recognition. In all honesty, Isaac doesn’t have much experience with cars. He has his license, but, without a car of his own, it doesn’t get much use. Really, he’s only ever driven his dad’s old car, which was a piece of work even before it was demolished by the kanima. Isaac has even less experience working on cars than he does with driving them. Unsurprisingly, his dad was never the type to fix one up with his son, that’s for sure. Still, Stiles’ Jeep is notorious for being a piece of shit, even Isaac can see that.

Derek takes the jumper cables back from Isaac, attaching them to the correct locations. Then, Isaac stops paying attention to the cars, instead concentrating on Derek and especially Aiden. There’s something nervous about the way Aiden is carrying himself. Like he has something on his mind, but he’s trying to work up the nerve to say it.

Derek, for his part, is providing Aiden with absolutely nothing, which, again, Isaac appreciates. Aiden might have been willing to help them find Stiles tonight, but Isaac still doesn’t like or trust him. It’s fun watching him sweat.

When Derek finally does say something it’s, “Try starting the Jeep.”

Isaac doesn’t move, content to “sit pretty” as Derek had put it, so it’s Aiden who complies. He climbs inside the Jeep, and, with a groaning rumble and a bit of coercion, the engine comes to life.

Aiden exits the Jeep. He hesitates for a second, then he finally cracks, “So, you think he was sleepwalking? Or is there something more to it?”

Isaac presses up from his spot along Derek’s car. He doesn’t move, just stands up straight, listening.

“In this town, there’s always something more,” Derek says, removing the cables from the Jeep. He doesn’t make eye contact with Aiden,

continuing to hold him at arm's length as he finishes the task at hand.

Derek heads towards the driver's side of his own car, like he's going to leave it at that. He has every intention of cutting the conversation short, and Isaac knows he would do it without remorse.

"What if I told you I know something more?" Aiden says, speaking up just in time.

Derek stops in his movements, but he doesn't show any outward displays of surprise. He doesn't react at all, really. Aiden and Derek stand on opposite sides of the car, completely still. Isaac flicks his focus between the two of them, watching and waiting. Derek doesn't say a word, but he raises his eyebrows as if to say, *go on*.

"I kind of overheard..." Aiden cuts himself off, head tilting. He corrects, "Well, I listened in on Stiles talking to Scott. How he thinks he was the one who wrote that message in the chemistry room. The message telling Barrow to kill Kira."

It's news to Isaac. But, suddenly, all the times he felt like Scott was holding back on him start to make more sense. Scott only withholds information when he's protecting someone other than himself. Isaac can't find in himself to be angry or hurt or anything at all. Not when the person Scott was protecting is Stiles.

"You think Stiles – skinny, defenseless Stiles – is the nogitsune? A powerful, dark spirit?" Derek asks. His voice is coated in disbelief, intended to make Aiden feel stupid.

For a moment, it seems like Aiden's confidence is dashed, but then he says, "I'm not the only one thinking it. I'm just the only one saying it."

And, as much as Isaac doesn't want to agree with him, maybe Aiden has a point. They can all sense that something is happening to Stiles, something none of them can explain, something linked to the sacrifice. Maybe he is the nogitsune.

"This thing wants to possess somebody and it chooses Stiles?" Derek questions. "Why wouldn't it take someone bigger, stronger? Someone with a little more..." Derek trails off. He looks lost in his head, almost like he's having an epiphany right in this very moment. He glances down at the cables in his hands. "Power."

Derek slowly brings the two ends of the cables together, causing a small spark of electricity.

Aiden is watching Derek, waiting for further explanation, but it never comes. Instead, Derek returns the jumper cables to the trunk of his car, then says, “Come on, Isaac. I should drive you back.”

Isaac takes the hint and gets back in the car. He watches as Aiden and Derek share one last mutual gaze. Aiden looks frustrated, but he doesn’t try to say anything else. He knows the conversation is over.

Derek joins Isaac with a harsh slam of the car door. He gives Isaac a pointed look, one that Isaac knows means, *don’t say anything*. Isaac doesn’t. He keeps his mouth firmly shut until they’re all the way out of the hospital parking lot and half a mile down the main road.

Only then does Isaac say, “You figured something out.”

“Barrow,” Derek says, nodding. “It felt so random. His escape, his *failed* attempt at killing Kira. It didn’t make sense to me.”

“But you figured it out,” Isaac says again. It’s not a question.

“Barrow was never meant to kill Kira. I mean, maybe he thought he was going to, but that wasn’t the nogitsune’s plan. I think...” Derek says. “I think the nogitsune used Kira’s spark to jump start the nogitsune’s power.”

“Inside Stiles?” Isaac asks. He doesn’t need to ask. Stiles is the only person there that night who hasn’t undergone the oni’s test. But Isaac needs to hear Derek say it.

“Inside Stiles,” Derek confirms.

“So, you think Aiden’s right? You think Stiles is the nogitsune?” Isaac questions.

“It’s the only thing that makes sense,” Derek says.

And he’s right. Isaac knows he is. Still, it’s hard for Isaac to make sense of it all. They just saved Stiles, but the relief only lasted so long. They had a five minute reprieve, but now the danger is back. This is worse than sleepwalking. This is...

“What – What do we do?” Isaac asks.

“Nothing tonight,” Derek says.

Usually, an answer like that would frustrate Isaac, but not tonight. Tonight, it’s reassuring. It’s permission for Isaac to rest. When the sun

risers, the problem will rise alongside it. But, for now, Isaac can let it lie, just below the horizon. Out of sight, but not quite out of mind.

Back at the McCall house, Isaac waits up for Scott. He wants to check in with him, make sure he's okay. He won't bring up the nogitsune. Not tonight. Clearly, Scott is already aware of the possibility. There's no point in discussing it now.

When Scott comes home, Isaac doesn't have to go find him. Scott comes straight up to the guest bedroom. As soon as Isaac sees him, he asks, "How is he?"

"He's okay," Scott says, nodding. "He was sleeping when I left. They're gonna, uh, they're gonna run some tests tomorrow."

It should be a win. They found Stiles with no bodily harm. It should be cause for at least a small celebration, and yet, Scott looks so sad. Isaac is feeling it too, but Stiles is everything to Scott. Stiles is Scott's best friend, his brother. Whatever Isaac is feeling, it's a hundred times worse for Scott.

Isaac hums. "He's lucky to have you."

Scott exhales a laugh, "Are you kidding? *I'm* lucky to have him. I would be dead without him. Stiles would be... Stiles would be fine without me."

"No," Isaac says, shaking his head, "You two need each other."

"Yeah," Scott smiles, but it quickly turns sad. He sighs, "I should—"

"If you're about to say you should have done more, you – just. No, Scott. We got to him in time. He's alive. You did the best you could," Isaac says. He can't watch Scott tear himself apart, blaming himself for every perceived loss. Isaac can't stomach it. Not tonight. Scott doesn't deserve it. He never does.

Scott's mouth drops open in shock. "I was just gonna say I should go back to sleep."

Embarrassment washes over Isaac. He's pretty sure his face is flushed and red. He flounders, mouth opening and closing, trying to figure out how to backtrack. All he manages is a quiet, "Uhh..."

Scott laughs. It's a small thing, barely there but still real. "Thanks, Iz."

Then, he turns and walks away, leaving Isaac sitting there feeling like a complete idiot.

—

This time, when Isaac is harshly awoken, it's to the sound of his phone alarm. Isaac quickly shuts it off, and then checks his notifications. He finds a bunch of text messages, all from Allison and all from within the last hour. Starting with: **My phone was turned off. I never turn it off.**

Then, from fifty minutes ago: **Is Stiles ok?**

Forty-three minutes ago: **Isaac?**

Thirty-nine minutes ago: **Lydia said they found him.**

Eleven minutes ago: **I need to show you something. Meet me before class.**

Isaac looks at the time. If he wants to catch up with Allison before school starts, he needs to get a move on. Isaac rushes around getting ready, still half asleep as he goes.

Isaac doesn't cross paths with Scott that morning, but he doesn't mind. Seeing Scott will remind Isaac of Stiles, which will remind him of everything that's falling apart around them.

When Isaac arrives at the school, he finds Allison waiting outside, just beyond the parking lot. Isaac speed walks over to her, asking, "Where were you last night?"

"Asleep," Allison says, sounding anxious and apologetic. "I seriously don't know what happened. I never turn my phone off. Is Stiles okay?"

"Yeah, he's still at the hospital," Isaac says.

"What happened?" Allison asks.

"He was asleep the entire time. He thought he was in some basement, but he was actually in Malia's coyote den," Isaac says as succinctly as he can. He doesn't mention the nogitsune or Derek's theory.

Allison's face takes on an expression of shock and worry, "But he's okay?"

Isaac shrugs. He doesn't know how to answer. He doesn't know anything. Not really, not for certain. He doesn't know what okay is anymore. He doesn't... He just doesn't know. So, instead of delving deeper, Isaac just asks, "What were you going to show me?"

"Oh, right," Allison pulls her phone from her pocket. She holds it up for Isaac to see, saying, "When I woke up, I had a bunch of missed messages from you and Scott, but also, this." Allison hits play on a voicemail. A man's voice comes through the speaker, though Isaac can't understand a word he's saying. It's not in English. To Isaac's ears, it sounds like an Asian language, but he can't place it.

"What is that?" Isaac asks.

"I don't know, but there's a dozen messages just like this one," Allison explains. "I think it might be Japanese? Maybe Mr. Yukimura could translate it for us?"

It's probably the best and only idea they're going to come up with. Mr. Yukimura himself is from South Korea, but, based on what he's revealed about himself in class, they know he lived in Japan for some time. He might be able to help them. At the very least, he could confirm or deny their suspicions about the language.

So, Isaac agrees, saying, "We should go now if we want to catch him before school starts."

Allison nods and the pair, as nonchalantly as possible, rush to the history classroom. There, they find Mr. Yukimura standing at the chalkboard, preparing for his first class of the day.

Allison says, "Um, sorry, Mr. Yukimura, we – we were hoping to ask you a question about something?"

Mr. Yukimura looks away from the chalkboard, taking in Isaac and Allison's presence. For just a second, there's an unusual glint in his eyes. Like maybe he knows more than he lets on, almost like he's sizing them up. But as quickly as the look appears, it vanishes. Mr. Yukimura falls back into his role of the helpful, involved teacher, saying, "Sure. What can I help you with?"

Isaac and Allison enter the room as Mr. Yukimura leans against his desk, settling in to help them.

Allison starts to explain the situation, stating, "I received a bunch of strange voicemails last night, and we think they might be in

Japanese.”

Mr. Yukimura nods, gesturing for Allison to play the voicemail. Allison clicks play, handing the phone over to the teacher. The three of them stand around it, listening closely.

“You’re right. It’s Japanese,” Mr. Yukimura says as the recording plays. “Who left this on your phone?”

“I don’t know,” Allison says. “All the messages are the same and they all say Blocked ID.”

“Can you translate it?” Isaac asks.

“Mostly,” Mr. Yukimura says. “The man speaking is giving instructions actually.” As soon as he says it, Isaac picks up on the distinct tone. The man speaking isn’t talking to Allison or into the phone. The words are practiced, rehearsed. Mr. Yukimura translates, “The first line is, ‘All evacuees are required to stay at least ten feet back from outside fences.’”

Isaac glances over at Allison, seeing his own confusion mirrored in her expression. Looking back to Mr. Yukimura, he asks, “What does that mean? What fences?”

“The fences surrounding a Japanese internment camp during World War II,” Mr. Yukimura says. “After Pearl Harbor, Japanese-Americans were rounded up and put in camps. This man is reading instructions to prisoners upon their arrival.”

Mr. Yukimura pauses the voicemail, handing the phone back to Allison. She asks, “Well, where does something like this come from?”

“I have no idea,” Mr. Yukimura says. “Because it’s fake.” Shocked, Isaac and Allison both immediately look up from the phone, giving Mr. Yukimura their undivided attention. He continues, saying, “It mentions the name of the internment camp as ‘Oak Creek.’ There was no internment camp named Oak Creek in California.”

Isaac and Allison share in a moment of weighted eye contact. Isaac knows they’re both thinking the same thing. There’s something not quite right, something doesn’t add up.

Then, the moment breaks. They thank Mr. Yukimura for his time and assistance before ducking out of the classroom.

A little ways down the hallway, Allison says, "I have to get to class, but we should try to look into Oak Creek. It *has* to mean something."

Isaac wholeheartedly agrees. Allison's phone being inexplicably turned off on the one night where Stiles went missing would have been one thing, but for a faked recording to be left waiting for her... It's too bizarre to be a coincidence. Nothing in Beacon Hills is ever a coincidence – history speaks for itself on that one – but this is especially creepy. It's significant. It's a clue. They just don't know what mystery it's a part of yet.

With nothing more to discuss right now, Isaac and Allison go their separate ways.

Across the hallway, Isaac spots Scott and Lydia. He maneuvers his way through the sea of students, making his way over to the pair and hoping to check on both of them. Scott is going to need a little extra support today, and, maybe, Lydia found something worthwhile last night.

As Isaac comes closer, the first thing he notices is how worn out Lydia looks. Her appearance is impeccably put together, as it always is, but her eyes give her away. They're open wide, darting from left to right, but there's a dullness underneath. She doesn't have her usual sparkle, that special Lydia Martin glow.

Scott must notice it too because, as Isaac approaches, he asks, "You okay?"

Isaac watches Lydia. As each locker slams, she seems to flinch more and more violently. She's casting her eyes around the hallway, back and forth and back and forth. She takes a deep breath in and steadies herself.

"Yeah," she says, still seeming hazy around the edges. "Just a little hyper-sensitive to loud sounds today."

She jumps again. Isaac glances around for the source of the noise, but hears nothing. That's never a good sign with Lydia. Before he can say anything about it, Scott states, "They're doing tests on Stiles all afternoon. I was going to go over there around six to visit. Either of you want to come with me?"

Scott glances between Lydia and Isaac, though his gaze lingers on Lydia a little longer, looks at her a little more purposefully.

"I should probably just go home," Lydia says. She flinches *again*. It's not a small thing either. It's a harsh, jerking movement. There's something pained about her expression.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Isaac asks.

Lydia looks up at him, like she's noticing his presence for the first time.

"Yeah," she says. She looks over to Scott. "I'll text you later."

Then, Lydia makes a quick exit. She slides past Isaac and into the heart of the hallway, moving like she's in a daze.

"Is she okay?" Isaac asks Scott, even though it's obvious she isn't.

"I think she's just shaken up," Scott says. "Before we found Stiles last night, she was convinced he was at Eichen House. I think she feels guilty that she wasn't the one who found him."

Isaac hums. He understands where the feeling would come from, but they found Stiles. It shouldn't matter who was wrong and who was right. For now, Stiles is okay. That's the important part.

"Do you want to come with me later?" Scott asks.

Isaac pauses. It really shouldn't be a difficult question. In all honesty, Isaac does want to go. He wants to see Stiles, wants to see that he's okay with his own eyes. (Although, if they're running tests all afternoon, is he really okay?) He wants to offer Scott support, wants to be there for him. He wants to go, but there's something holding him back.

Part of Isaac feels like it's not really his place. Sure, Isaac and Stiles are friends now, but only barely. They're not that close. Their relationship isn't like the one Stiles has with Scott or Lydia or even Derek. It's a mere thing, probably more important to Isaac than to Stiles.

Isaac knows Stiles doesn't hate him. He knows they have a connection from saving each other's lives, but Isaac isn't a person in Stiles' life. He's just a person on the outskirts of it. He's not in the inner circle, and that's okay.

Isaac just... Isaac doesn't want to get in the way.

So, instead of saying yes, he says, “Maybe. Allison and I are going to do some research later. She got a strange voicemail last night that might lead to some important information.”

Scott’s eyebrows lift in surprise. He opens his mouth, looking like he’s about to ask a question, but Isaac beats him to it. “I’ll tell you if we find anything, but, for now, don’t worry about it. You have enough on your plate.”

Scott’s expression softens. “Thank you, Isaac.”

Isaac nods, “Anytime, Scott.”

—

After school, Allison and Isaac go to the Argent apartment to try to get some research done. Once again, they take the stairs. Once again, they don’t talk about it.

They go to Allison’s room where she pulls out her laptop and a history textbook about World War II. She says, “I don’t really know where to start.”

“Would your dad know anything about it?” Isaac asks. He always seems to know something. Isaac is almost jealous of his arsenal of knowledge.

“Couldn’t hurt to ask,” Allison says. She pulls her phone out and starts typing out a text.

Once the message has been sent, Allison opens her computer. She formulates a quick search for *Oak Creek internment camp*, but, unsurprisingly, nothing pops up.

“I really thought that might work,” Allison says.

“Nothing is that easy in Beacon Hills,” Isaac says.

It sounds pessimistic, but it’s not. It’s the truth, and the next couple of hours prove him right. They spend the time doing a deep dive into the history of World War II in California, the treatment of Japanese-Americans during that time period, and any mentions of an Oak Creek in California. They scrounge the internet for information, but when they come to a stop, they have nothing to show for their hard work. It seems Mr. Yukimura was right. There was no internment camp called Oak Creek.

It's not until after the sun has set that Isaac receives a message from Derek: **I'm going to the hospital to see Stiles. You should come.**

Isaac pretends he doesn't see it.

Isaac can intellectualize his hesitancy all he wants, but the truth is: he's just scared. He's scared to show how much he actually cares about Stiles. He's scared to show how worried he is. He's scared.

Isaac has been incapable of vulnerability for as long as he can remember. For Isaac, being vulnerable meant giving his dad ammunition. It meant showing him exactly where Isaac's weakness lies, exactly where to strike to do the most damage. For Isaac, vulnerability meant pain.

There's something inherently vulnerable about visiting someone at the hospital. And Isaac just can't do it. He's too scared.

"Are you okay?" Allison asks, bringing Isaac out of his reverie. She looks at him with those warm brown eyes, but there's an added softness to her that Isaac hasn't witnessed before. Isaac thinks he could spend forever learning just how deep Allison Argent's kindness goes.

Isaac shrugs. "It's just..."

"Stiles?" Allison asks. When all Isaac does is nod, Allison continues, "Is he okay?"

"No new updates, but... Scott invited me to come visit," Isaac says. The words are right there, *I want to go*, but he can't make himself say it. As much as he wants to open up to Allison, as safe as he feels with her, he can't do it. He just can't.

"We should go," Allison says, easy as anything. "We're not making any progress here, anyway."

"You would go?" Isaac asks. He doesn't mean to sound so surprised.

"Of course," Allison says, eyebrows furrowed just a little. She's looking at Isaac in that funny way again, like he's something strange. Not bad, just odd. It's becoming a regular in the rotation of looks Allison uses on him. She adds, "Stiles is my friend. I'm worried about him too."

Isaac nods, "Okay."

“Okay as in... we should go?” Allison clarifies.

“Yes,” Isaac says. This way, it’s almost like Allison made the decision for him. They can show up together as a unit. It’s less daunting to do it together.

And so, Allison clears away the mess of useless research on her bed, and then they head on their way. Allison drives them to the hospital and Isaac tries to calm the rest of his unnecessary nerves. Everything is going so smoothly – they make almost every green light and the radio plays good songs – but then, they pull into the hospital parking lot, and chaos descends upon them.

Letharia Vulpina

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 19

Word count: 7,375

Chapter Notes

We're officially a quarter of the way through the fic! Woohoo!

It's chaos.

There's a throng of people outside the hospital, all shouting and rushing about. There's an ambulance that has crashed into a fire hydrant, causing it to burst open. There's water flooding into the parking lot, creating a pool over the asphalt.

Worst of all, there's a cut electrical wire flying through the air. It sends sparks of electricity in every direction, raining down onto the parking lot.

Allison slams on the brakes, coming to halt beyond the edge of the water line. Isaac and Allison cautiously step out of the car. They're surrounded by disaster, completely caught off guard by it all.

Isaac watches in stunned fear as the ambulance driver steps out of the vehicle, right into the water. Immediately, the man goes stiff as a board. The electric current runs through his body, forcing him still. He collapses.

"Get back! Everyone, get back!" A familiar voice shouts. For a moment, Isaac can't place where he recognizes it from, but then he spots Kira across the other side of the parking lot. She's frantically yelling, "Everyone, get back!"

That's when Allison spots the ambulance driver. Not thinking, she runs forward to help. Isaac notices her movement, and, immediately, uses both hands to push her back. Isaac doesn't hold back his strength, he needs to keep Allison away from the water. She's only human.

So is the driver.

Isaac doesn't think about it. He just does it. It's the right thing to do.

He has to try.

He steps into the water.

All at once, the electricity slams into him. Isaac tries to fight it, tries to power through, but he can't. He loses control of his muscles, they spasm and tighten. He can't move, he can't fight it, he can't control it. He tips forward.

And it hurts. It hurts so much. The pain is an all consuming thing. Everything else around him falls away. There's no sound, no sight, no smells. There's nothing beyond the current forcing its way through his body. Isaac trembles.

The last thing Isaac remembers is water splashing up around him and a distant thought of Boyd.

—

When Isaac wakes, he's greeted by pain. It's a dull ache throughout his entire body, a stiffness in his muscles and joints, a sharp throbbing on the right side of his neck. Isaac's fingertips are twitching every few seconds, like the electricity is still there, fighting for a way out. The minute movements cause pain to surge through his body, but Isaac can't stop them.

He can't do anything, really. He can wiggle his toes, but that hurts too. He wants to open his eyes, he wants to lift his neck, but he can't. He's too weak, too far away. There's something distinctly vulnerable about being unable to move, about being unable to do the simplest of things, like open his eyes.

Isaac wants to speak. He wants to say something, alert someone that he's awake. He's awake and it hurts. It hurts.

Isaac is about to let himself drift away, away from the pain and back into unconsciousness, when he hears it.

"You have to let me see him!" It's Derek's voice, easily recognizable to Isaac, and, from the sound of it, he's not happy.

"I'm sorry, sir, no matter how close you are, you're not related," a second, unfamiliar voice says.

"And as I've told you, he doesn't have any family! *I'm* his family!" Derek's shouting, but his voice is less angry and more distraught.

Isaac can't move, but if he could, he would probably be smiling.

The next time Isaac wakes up, he can open his eyes. He immediately feels blinded by the obnoxiously bright fluorescent lights. Isaac looks slightly to his left and... Oh. The lights have nothing on Scott McCall's smile.

"Isaac," he says, like a breath of fresh air. "You're awake."

Isaac doesn't say anything. He still can't move much and he doesn't trust himself to speak. Scott doesn't seem to mind, if the brightness of his smile is any indication.

It's then that Isaac realizes he's not in any pain. He can't move his neck to look down, but he can feel Scott's hand on his, drawing out the pain. It's got almost a warming effect, like standing in the sunshine.

Isaac breathes out shakily. Then, whispers, "Scott."

"I'm here," Scott nods. For a moment, Scott rubs his thumb over the back of Isaac's hand. "You're healing, by the way. It's – It's slower than usual, but you're going to be okay."

With Scott taking his pain, Isaac can't tell how much he's actually improved since the night before. It's disconcerting. Enough so that, under Scott's grip, Isaac wiggles his fingers. Scott's eyebrows raise.

"Let go," Isaac says. His voice sounds scratchy and tired and weak.

Scott shakes his head, like he's going to protest. Isaac appreciates Scott's willingness to help, to shoulder the burden of Isaac's pain, but he's an alpha now. He has to be more careful about how much pain he takes. Isaac isn't on his deathbed, and he refuses to take a second alpha's power.

(Peter was right when he said Scott and Derek were more similar than they let on.)

Isaac wiggles his fingers again, trying to dislodge Scott. Isaac can't fully pull his hand away, he doesn't have the strength and fears the damage any movement could cause. Isaac can't force him to let go, but Scott does anyway.

Hesitantly, Scott releases. He keeps his hand settled over Isaac's, but he stops taking his pain. The pain doesn't come back all at once, not like it did when Isaac was fighting Jennifer Blake's poison. No, this time, it creeps back in slowly.

The pain starts as a sharp jolt in Isaac's right side, over his neck where the worst of his electrical burns are. It starts there, and then it dulls. The pain spreads through the rest of his body, prickling under the surface as a muted sting.

It's the pain concentrated around Isaac's neck that's the worst. It's fiercer, harsher. The location of the injury makes it difficult for Isaac to take deep breaths. Instead, his lungs are drawing in shallow, shuddering breaths of air.

It's nowhere near as intense as it was the night before, but it's certainly unpleasant. Isaac focuses on taking a proper breath, breathing into his diaphragm and letting the oxygen fill him up. He holds the breath for a few seconds – one, two, three – then releases.

Isaac does this twice more, and, then, when he feels like he can breathe again, he says, "See? I'm okay, Scott."

Scott looks skeptical, but he nods. He still doesn't move his hand. Though, honestly, Isaac doesn't mind. The contact is nice. It's reassuring. It makes Isaac feel a little more human, a little more alive.

After a short moment of silence, Isaac asks, "What, um, what happened?"

Scott's eyes turn sad. He's looking down at his lap. Isaac can't see anything below eye level, but he can practically hear the way Scott's knee is jumping. Isaac almost expects Scott to avoid the question, but he doesn't. "It was Stiles. He cut the wire. He – He's the nogitsune."

Isaac shouldn't be surprised. As it stands, Isaac and Derek had already discussed the very real possibility. Still, the reality that Stiles was the one who did this, Stiles was the one who hurt all those people, Stiles was the one who hurt *him*. It's hard to reconcile.

Especially because Isaac knows, as soon as they bring Stiles back to himself – which is a question of when, not if – Stiles is going to feel horrible. He's going to blame himself, he's going to want to apologize. Isaac isn't sure if he can handle being on the receiving end of that level of guilt.

“Where is he?” Isaac asks. He’s worried about Stiles, more than he would maybe care to admit.

“We don’t know. He disappeared,” Scott says. Isaac can’t say he’s surprised Stiles is missing, but he is surprised that Scott is here. With him. Instead of out looking. “He tried to tell me it was him, and I just – I didn’t want to believe him.”

“You couldn’t have prevented this, Scott. It’s not your fault,” Isaac says. Scott glances up, meeting Isaac’s eyes for just a moment, but then they drop again. He’s unconvinced, so Isaac adds, “You’re not allowed to argue with me when I’m in a hospital bed.”

Scott almost smiles. It doesn’t quite reach his eyes, but he does squeeze his fingers over Isaac’s.

“Did anyone else get hurt?” Isaac asks. Maybe he shouldn’t ask, maybe it would be better if he didn’t know.

“The, uh, the ambulance driver didn’t make it. A few other people stepped in the water, but they’re all going to be okay,” Scott says. Isaac feels a rush of guilt flood through his body. Realistically, Isaac knows he did everything he could. There’s no way he could have saved the driver, but, still, he feels culpable. It’s a sharp bite of failure, probably not unlike how Scott is feeling right now.

The worst part is, the driver was nothing more than collateral damage. The first innocent victim of the tsunami.

“You couldn’t have prevented that, Isaac,” Scott says, giving him a weighted, brown eyed gaze.

If Isaac could, he would shrug, but he still can’t really move. So he says and does nothing.

At his silence, Scott continues, “Kira was able to catch the wire and stop the flow of electricity.”

Scott’s face twists, his chemosignals shift. He’s confused, almost conflicted. At first, Isaac doesn’t understand the mixed feelings. Kira stopped the situation from escalating, that should be an inarguably good thing. But then Isaac remembers Derek and his theory.

“Derek told you,” Isaac says. Any other time, he might not be so candid, but he’s in a hospital bed with electrical burns. He can’t be bothered to filter every word and thought, not like he usually does.

Scott looks surprised, eyes widening and his hand almost pulling away from Isaac's. His head tilts, "You knew?"

Isaac twitches. It's an impulse, like he was about to shake his head, but the movement immediately inflicts pain upon him. Isaac winces, sucking a breath through his teeth and biting down hard.

Scott pulls, and Isaac lets him. Isaac lets Scott steady the fresh wave of pain, but nothing more. As soon as the pain starts to dissipate and level out, Isaac flexes his fingers. Scott doesn't fight it this time, just stops.

"Sorry," Scott says, looking contrite.

"It's okay," Isaac says, careful not to move his head. Scott sits patiently as Isaac takes another round of practiced breaths, then explains, "Derek told me his theory after Stiles was found in the coyote den. I figured you already knew what could be happening to Stiles and until Derek was sure it just... it didn't seem worth it to bring it up that night and then, well, you know." Isaac pointedly flicks his eyes around the room, drawing attention to their current predicament.

"I – Thank you," Scott says, which is not the reaction Isaac had been expecting. It must show on his face because Scott adds, "I couldn't have handled it that night."

The room falls into quiet. Despite the horrific circumstances and the pain making itself at home under his skin, it's comfortable. Scott just sits with him. He keeps his hand over Isaac's, acting as both a reassurance and a precaution. Every time Isaac's body involuntarily twitches, sending pain shooting through him, Scott instantly siphons it away. Isaac has to close his eyes each time, can't stand to watch how his own pain causes Scott anguish.

After some time has passed, Scott says, "You know, Derek was here yesterday, and we got to talking, not just about Kira."

Isaac furrows his eyebrows. Clearly, Scott is building up to something, Isaac just doesn't know what that is yet. Admittedly, it makes him a little nervous. Scott and Derek are the most important people in Isaac's life. He can't help but feel a little apprehensive.

"He told me about how he went to Mexico to get his mother's claws. He didn't tell me everything, but he said he came back to protect Beacon Hills," Scott pauses. He taps a little rhythm into Isaac's hand.

He's looking at Isaac so attentively. "To protect you."

Isaac feels his heart jump. Derek is an asshole. Of course, he would phrase it like that. Still, there's a small smile tugging at the corner of Isaac's mouth.

"He didn't come back *just* for me," Isaac mumbles because he can't think of anything better to say.

"Maybe not," Scott says, "but that's not really why I'm bringing it up. He... He told me he asked you to move back in with him."

Isaac probably should have been prepared for it, but, in the chaos of the last few days, the offer had slipped his mind. "Uhh—"

Scott, graciously, cuts him off. "I'm not mentioning it because I want an answer. I'm just saying..." Scott sighs, like maybe he doesn't know exactly what he's saying. Eventually he settles on, "You and Derek are good for each other. Derek has changed a lot and I – I don't think there's a wrong decision here. No matter what you decide, I'm not going anywhere. You're still pack."

"I'm... pack?" And maybe Isaac shouldn't have said that out loud, but he's injured and exhausted and it just slips out.

Scott's face twists into one of pure bewilderment. "You – Isaac, are you kidding? Of course you're part of the pack. What kind of question is that?"

Isaac, feeling a little bit scolded and a lot stupid, frowns. He wants to squirm away from the conversation, but he quite literally can't. He huffs. "I just – I thought."

Scott's looking at Isaac like he's something precious and amusing. Isaac kind of hates it. (He doesn't.)

"Isaac, I will always consider you part of my pack," Scott says.

"What about Derek?" Isaac asks. He knows Derek isn't an alpha anymore, but, still, Isaac had been operating under the assumption that he and Derek were their own pack, small as it may be.

"Well, that's a bit more complicated," Scott says, then like he's still thinking it over, "There's a space for Derek in the pack if he wants it, and he's basically already taken it, but... it's complicated."

Isaac understands why it's complicated, he just wishes it wasn't. He craves simplicity like nothing else. He wants just one thing to be easy.

"I haven't decided anything yet," Isaac says, needing Scott to know that.

"And that's okay," Scott says. "There's no rush, I just thought it would be better to get it out in the open. That way you don't feel like you're keeping any secrets."

Scott's right. It is better. Isaac feels like a weight has been lifted.

Before Isaac can say anything else, the door to the hospital room opens and Melissa walks in. She gets right to business, saying, "Scott, you need to get to school, and, Isaac, I need to check your vitals."

Scott hesitates. He holds Isaac's hand a little tighter, making deliberate eye contact. Softly, he says, "If you don't get discharged, I'll be back later, okay?"

"Okay," Isaac says.

Scott, being the hero he is, takes just a bit more of Isaac's pain before he makes his exit. Isaac doesn't try to stop it, just accepts the relief with gratitude.

When Scott is gone, Melissa approaches the bed. "How are you feeling, Isaac?"

"I'm all right. It's – It's not too bad," Isaac says honestly. The discomfort is definitely present, but he can feel himself healing. It's slow, but it's progress.

"You're looking much better," Melissa says. There's a curious look about her, like maybe she's struggling to see Isaac like this. Still, she doesn't mention it.

She checks his blood pressure and oxygen levels first. His blood pressure is almost textbook perfect – 127/82 – but his oxygen is a little low, only 96. Melissa isn't too concerned about it, especially when Isaac tells her it's the pain that's making it harder to breathe. The more he heals, the more his lungs will cooperate, and he's healing at a steady rate. They'll only start to worry if that changes.

"I'm just going to listen to your heart, then we're done, all right?" Melissa asks.

Isaac consents. Melissa uses her stethoscope, sliding it over Isaac's chest. Isaac breathes when she tells him to breathe and, soon enough, she's done.

"Well, by some miracle, you sound in perfect condition," Melissa says, there's awe in her voice, like she still can't quite believe the wonders of werewolf healing. Isaac can't blame her. Then, Melissa glances at the door and a little quieter, adds, "Now, I've taken over your care, so fingers crossed no other nurses will bust us for breaking the rules, but, that being said, Derek would really like to see you. Are you feeling up to it?"

"Yeah, yes, please," Isaac instantly agrees. In part because he hates the idea of being left alone here, but, also, he just really wants to see Derek.

And so, Melissa exits. This time, when she returns, it's with Derek in tow. She pauses in the doorway for just a moment, subjecting Isaac to a small nod and almost sad smile, then she leaves them be.

The door shuts with a soft whoosh and click, closing them in. A standstill tension accompanies Derek, following him into the room and blanketing the pair.

Then Derek steps forward, and it breaks.

Derek stops just beyond the edge of the hospital bed. He's looking down at Isaac with so much care, so much attention. Isaac almost wants to look away, but he doesn't. Instead, he gives a quiet, "Hi."

"Hey," Derek says, matching Isaac's hushed volume in return.

Derek shakes himself out of his stunned daze, coming to sit in the chair Scott just vacated. For a moment, Derek and Isaac say nothing. Derek just keeps looking at Isaac, taking in every inch of charred, black skin and the colorless pale that has taken over his complexion. Isaac can feel the weight of his eyes on him, but he stays perfectly still.

"Have you – Have you been awake long?" Derek asks.

It's not the question Isaac was expecting, but he doesn't mind. It's practical, easy to answer. Isaac appreciates it. He says, "I only fully woke up when Scott was here, but I was in and out a few times last night."

Derek tsks. "I'm sorry I wasn't here."

"Well, now you're just lying," Isaac says with a hint of humor. "I distinctly remember hearing *someone* yelling at an innocent nurse."

"Innocent my ass," Derek huffs, frustration flooding his tone. "I mean, seriously, they're going to let a seventeen year old kid spend the night alone? In agony? Just for some stupid policy bull—" Derek cuts himself off with a shaky sigh. Isaac has to force down a bubble of laughter, trying to conceal his amusement.

"Derek, it's fine," Isaac says, smiling a little. "I wasn't alone. I knew you were out there."

"I just wanted to see you..." Derek sighs. His voice goes hushed, "You weren't breathing when I got to you."

Isaac hadn't known that.

Wanting to offer reassurance and not knowing how else to do it, Isaac takes a dramatically large breath. He sucks air into his lungs, preparing to prove a point, when he starts to cough. It would have been fine, if not for the burns on his neck. Each subsequent cough sends bolts of pain through Isaac's body. In turn, it becomes harder and harder to breathe.

And then Derek's fingers are circling Isaac's wrist, forming a loose hold. In an instant, the pain subsides and Isaac's cough dies in his throat. Air enters his lungs and the burning, frantic feeling subsides. Isaac steadies himself with slow, even breaths.

Derek waits until Isaac's heart is no longer racing and his wheezing has ceased. Only then does he release his hold. Isaac slowly and sheepishly turns his eyes over to Derek, finding one of his signature deadpan stares waiting there for him.

"You're a fucking idiot," Derek says.

"I was trying to prove a point!" Isaac says, in a not so successful attempt at defending himself. "It was supposed to be comforting."

Derek rolls his eyes and repeats, "You're an idiot."

Isaac huffs, but, in all honesty, Derek's right. Isaac deserves that.

"I'm sorry," Derek says, seemingly out of the blue, but Isaac knew they

were leading up to this. “If I hadn’t told you to meet me–”

Isaac exhales, something that’s almost a laugh. He can’t help it. It’s just so reminiscent of his earlier conversation with Scott. But then Derek is glaring at him again, so he says, “I would have come anyway. It’s no one’s fault.”

“It’s not just that,” Derek says, voice falling into something much more solemn, he’s hardly looking at Isaac now. “I’m sorry for – for everything. I was horrible to you.”

“Derek, I know. I know you’re sorry and I know you’ve changed, you don’t – you don’t have to say it,” Isaac says. He doesn’t really want Derek to say it, if he’s honest.

“Yes, I do,” Derek says. “You might not need to hear it, but I need to say it. I almost lost you *again*. I was sitting outside your hospital room all night, and all I could think about was everything I never said. I – I don’t want those regrets. Not with you.”

Isaac observes. Derek’s eyes are trained on the edge of his hospital bed, unmoving. His expression hasn’t softened, it’s still his usual annoyed glower. But he’s not annoyed at Isaac. He’s annoyed at himself. Isaac doesn’t want Derek to keep feeling like this, to keep harboring this shame, and so he says, “Okay. I’ll listen.”

Derek’s eyes jump to Isaac’s for just a second before they flit away again. He takes a breath, like he’s readying himself, and then he begins.

“When I offered you the bite, I had no intention of helping you escape your dad,” and Isaac already knew that, but it still burns to hear it said so casually. “I knew he was abusing you, and I didn’t care. I saw it as an opportunity. I didn’t care what you did with your power as long as it fueled mine.”

Isaac doesn’t know what he’s supposed to say or how he’s supposed to feel. There’s nothing he can say that will assuage Derek’s guilt. At least, nothing truthful. So Isaac doesn’t say anything. Derek still won’t meet his eyes, but he does keep going.

“But that’s not even the worst part. The worst part is how I treated you when the consequences of my dumb actions cost you the last living member of your family. I broke bones and threw glasses and became the person you were running from,” Derek says. He spares Isaac a quick glance, but immediately turns away again, almost like it

hurts to look at him. “I – I kicked you out, and I really thought I was protecting you. I really did.”

“If you had told me what had happened with the alpha pack, I never would have run,” Isaac says because it’s true. It wasn’t right, the way it all went down, but Isaac never would have left voluntarily. Derek would have had to drag him out kicking and screaming. So that’s what he did. It doesn’t make it okay, or justified, but it also doesn’t make it cruel. Derek isn’t like his dad. His dad was ruthless without any cause, without any motivation. At least Derek thought he was doing what was best for Isaac, at least he thought he was protecting him, as misguided as it was.

“Maybe,” Derek says, though he doesn’t seem to really take the words in. He just keeps going, “And then Boyd died. *I* killed him. I *killed* them both, Boyd and Erica, and I – and before we even got a chance to breathe, you were poisoned at Jennifer’s hand, and that was my fault too. I let Jennifer in. I trusted her. I let her manipulate me, just like K–”

Derek heaves a big breath. He looks shaken. Isaac wants to reach out, wants to touch him, wants to comfort him. But he can’t. Every movement hurts and it might only make matters worse. Isaac can only sit in silence and watch Derek tear himself to pieces.

“When I saw you in that hospital bed, poisoned because of *me*, I just – Something changed. I had been so fueled by pain and anger and power for so long, and I just couldn’t do it anymore. In that moment, I knew I would do whatever it took to save you. I knew I would spend the rest of my life trying to keep you safe,” Derek says.

And, finally, he looks at Isaac. His expression is almost purposely blank, but Isaac can see his hands shaking and hear his heart pounding in his chest.

“I’m sorry.”

“I forgave you a long time ago, Derek,” Isaac says. “We’ve all done some messed up shit, but you’ve changed. You’re becoming more and more like Scott – don’t make that face, it’s a compliment – and we’ve all seen that. I forgive you, and, now, I’m giving you permission to forgive yourself.”

“I think I liked our relationship better when we were both emotionally stunted,” Derek says. There’s a shakiness in his voice, it sounds wet with emotion.

Isaac doesn't comment on it, instead, he laughs. "Oh, yeah, because we're totally un-traumatized now."

"I don't think that's a word," Derek says, but he's smiling. It's the proud smile, the one meant just for Isaac.

Derek and Isaac spend the rest of the morning together. Isaac, who is tired and focused on healing, makes Derek do most of the talking. It's very entertaining. Derek is usually a man of so few words, but, apparently, all it takes is an injured Isaac to get him going.

Derek tells Isaac more about his mother. He gets this sad smile when he talks about her, like he misses her. Derek tells Isaac his mom would have loved him, which causes something akin to longing to flare in Isaac's stomach.

Derek tells Isaac about what he was like in high school. He starts to describe himself, and then says, "Oh my god, I was exactly like Scott." It makes Isaac laugh hard enough it hurts.

Isaac makes Derek stop talking for a little bit after that. Instead, Derek pets Isaac's hair while he falls asleep. It's the most tender affection Isaac has received in years. If he wasn't so exhausted, he probably would have cried about it.

And when Isaac wakes up again, his burns are almost fully faded. Still, Derek sits with him. Derek tells Isaac about what it was like to grow up with Peter Hale as an uncle and what it was like to return to Beacon Hills after so many years.

Derek tells Isaac all about his days as the school's best basketball player, spending way too long trying to convince Isaac that basketball is better than lacrosse. Isaac says Derek can like whatever sport he wants as long as it's not swimming, which leads Derek into a rant about his newfound disdain for water. Derek tells Isaac all about the time the kanima trapped him and Stiles in the pool, paralyzing Derek so Stiles had to tread water to keep them afloat for *two* hours.

Derek just talks and talks. He tells Isaac so many small tidbits of information that Isaac is convinced no one else knows about Derek Hale. It makes Isaac feel warm and fuzzy. He feels soft around the edges. He feels at home.

Later in the afternoon, Melissa comes to check in on Isaac again. Isaac's burns have fully healed, becoming nothing but a stiff neck and sore joints. She checks his heart again, making sure the electricity didn't cause any lasting damage. When she finds nothing out of the ordinary, she gives him the all clear, saying, "I can discharge you now. If you're ready?"

Isaac eagerly agrees. As much as bonding with Derek has been enjoyable, he has no interest in existing in this hospital bed any longer.

Melissa starts on some final paperwork, and, eventually, they're free to go.

Derek leads Isaac out of the hospital and to his car. Once they're inside, Derek says, "I'm taking you back to the loft."

Isaac doesn't protest. Instead, he texts Scott: **Just got discharged. Going to Derek's loft.**

A few minutes later, he receives a message in reply: **Awesome! Stiles is back at school and is himself again.**

"Did you know Stiles is at the school?" Isaac asks, looking up from his phone.

"What? No," Derek says. He keeps his eyes on the road, but Isaac can feel the concern and confusion coming off him in waves.

"Scott says he's okay," Isaac says, though his voice betrays his skepticism. Isaac is too nice to share any of his doubts with Scott, but it doesn't make sense. Stiles causes pandemonium at the hospital, disappears, and then shows up at school the next day like nothing happened? It doesn't make sense. It's inexplicable.

Derek shakes his head, "Scott is in denial."

Isaac doesn't disagree.

—

When they get to the loft, Derek and Isaac take the stairs. (Isaac doesn't know when everyone realized he hated elevators, but apparently it's common knowledge now.) They're one floor down from the loft when the sound reaches their ears. It's a unique sound. One that two werewolves in Beacon Hills would easily recognize.

An emitter.

When the sound hits Isaac, he stumbles to a stop. Derek reaches a hand out to steady him, and they share in a brief moment of fearful eye contact. Then, they bolt up the last fourteen steps.

Derek reaches the loft ahead of Isaac, tearing open the sliding metal door. Isaac doesn't know what he was anticipating – some sort of disaster, some sort of something, but they find absolutely nothing. The loft is totally empty. All that's there is a single emitter, piercing into the fabric of one Isaac's beloved couch cushions.

Derek is immediately unsettled. He marches over to the emitter, pulling it out of the pillow, and turning it off with more gusto than the situation warrants. Derek looks around the entire loft, but there's nothing else to be found.

Isaac stands by the door, watching as Derek starts to spiral.

"I'm sure it's nothing. It's probably just a misunderstanding," Isaac says, keeping his voice level and calm.

Derek turns on Isaac. He doesn't look angry, he looks scared.

"Everyone is always breaking in here, Derek, you seriously need a better security system," Isaac says, bordering on snarky. He's trying to lighten the mood, trying to get Derek to relax, but it doesn't quite work.

Derek huffs. He squares his shoulders, "I need to figure this out."

"Okay," Isaac says slowly. "And what does that mean?"

"I need to go talk to Argent," he says. Then, "You can't stay here by yourself."

Isaac resists the urge to roll his eyes. He's fully healed, but he's tired. It's been a long couple of days. He really does not want to have to deal with any of this. So, Isaac says, "All right. You can drop me off at the McCall house."

Derek doesn't seem at all fazed by Isaac's lack of concern or desire to help. As soon as he heard that emitter, something inside Derek switched. He's got a one track mind now, and, until he gets to the bottom of it, he won't relax. Isaac, accepting there's nothing he can say that will get through to Derek, decides the best thing he can do is

step out of the way.

And so, that's what he does.

Isaac is in the kitchen, putting together a sandwich for a late lunch, when Melissa walks in the door. She seems cheery albeit tired, saying, "Hello, Isaac. I thought you were going to be with Derek."

She doesn't phrase it as a question, allowing Isaac to decide for himself whether or not he gives any extra intel. It's the small things about Melissa that prove how truly exceptional she is.

"He got caught up with something and figured I needed to rest," Isaac says with a small shrug. He doesn't feel the need to tell Melissa about the emitter, doubts it will amount to anything. Changing the topic, he asks, "Do you want a sandwich?"

"Oh, you are amazing, that would be great," Melissa says with obvious gratitude. "I'm just going to change out of my scrubs. I'll be back down in a few minutes. *Thank you.*"

She's so sincere and a little surprised. It makes Isaac want to do more for her in the future. He hadn't thought much of the offer, just figured while he was already making one it wouldn't be a big deal, but Melissa's reaction fills Isaac with something pleased, almost like pride or satisfaction. Isaac can't quite explain it, but he knows he wants to feel it again.

So, Isaac makes them both sandwiches. And when Melissa comes back downstairs, they sit in the living room, eating together. Melissa says, "Kitchen tables are for dinner and family events only."

"Couldn't agree more," Isaac says with a smile. It reminds him of Derek – the way he used to get grouchy whenever Isaac would eat on the couch. That, in turn, reminds Isaac of his current dilemma: whether or not to move back into the loft.

Now that Scott knows, even though he had plainly stated there was no rush, Isaac feels like he needs to make a decision. He doesn't want to leave both Derek and Scott hanging in the balance, but, the thing is, Isaac genuinely doesn't know what he wants. Isaac has never really had this kind of choice before. Growing up, Isaac didn't have a single loving home, let alone two. It reminds Isaac just how much his luck has changed. Sure, there are evil demons possessing his friends and he

almost died yesterday but...

But Isaac is part of Scott's pack and Derek is his family.

Isaac has *people* that care about him.

It's astonishing. Isaac can't believe this is a predicament he's actually experiencing. And yet, here he is.

Isaac has never made a choice like this. He's never had to choose between two good things, two good options. He never had to look inside himself and ask himself what he really wants. It's always been about survival. It's been about choosing the best of the worst.

Needless to say, Isaac doesn't know how to go about making a choice like this. He doesn't think he can do it.

"Isaac, sweetie, are you okay?" Melissa's voice breaks through Isaac's wave of thoughts. He realizes he's been sitting in stark silence, sandwich held halfway up to his mouth for who knows how long.

Isaac places the sandwich back on his plate. He doesn't consider the implications of the statement, just blurts out, "Derek asked me to move back in with him."

Melissa's eyebrows raise. She admits, "I was not expecting that."

"I wasn't either," Isaac says. "I just – I don't know what to do. I'm so thankful for everything you've done for me and for taking me in, but I–"

Have never felt at home here, Isaac doesn't say. He can't say that. It sounds horrible, but it's not. This just isn't his home. This isn't his family. As much as he cares about Scott and Melissa, it's different with Derek.

"Eat your sandwich, then we'll talk about it. Okay?" Melissa says. She locks eyes with Isaac, and all he sees is warmth and generosity.

His stomach grumbles his agreement.

When Isaac finishes his lunch, Melissa takes their plates out to the kitchen. She comes back with a smile and a piece of chocolate. Isaac readily accepts them both.

Melissa takes her spot on the couch next to Isaac, and says, "Listen, Isaac, if you had told me about this two days ago, I would have told

you it wasn't a good idea. But then, I watched Derek almost get thrown out of the hospital because he wouldn't stop trying to get in to see you. I watched him sit outside your hospital room all night. I watched him stay by your side and make you smile. So, yes, as a mom, the idea of you moving back in with Derek makes me nervous, given he's not the most trustworthy adult, but... you clearly care about each other. If it's what you want, I will support you."

"He almost got thrown out?" Isaac asks, unable to fight back his smile.

Melissa chuckles, "Yes, I'm glad that's the part you find most important."

"No, no, I – Derek and I had a long talk today about everything that happened and... I trust him, I really do. I trust that he's changed. It's just... it's a big gamble, I guess," Isaac says.

Melissa hums. "It sounds to me like you want to accept Derek's offer, but you're scared. Understandably so."

She's not wrong. The decision has never really been about Isaac's desire to stay here. He's so grateful that the McCalls opened their doors to him, but he always thought this would be temporary. And, despite knowing it's unfounded, as long as Isaac stays here, he will always feel like a burden or an inconvenience.

Isaac has been weighing the risk versus the reward. With the McCalls, Isaac has guaranteed safety. With Derek, Isaac has the chance at a real home. Isaac just doesn't know whether the former is worth giving up.

For as long as Isaac can remember, all he's ever wanted was to feel like he belonged somewhere. If Isaac moved in with Derek, he might finally have that.

"I think so too," Isaac says. "I think I want to give Derek a second chance, but I – I don't think I could handle going through another falling out with him."

"Well," Melissa says. "If you do decide to move in with Derek, there will always be a place for you here. You'll always have us to fall back on."

I will always consider you part of my pack. Melissa and Scott really are so much alike.

"Thank you," Isaac says. "Not just for this, but for everything. I don't

know where I would be without your kindness.”

Melissa smiles. “Scott always was the type to bring home every stray he found.”

Isaac laughs, he can’t help it. It’s just so in character for Scott. It’s exactly the type of person he is, and it’s exactly the reason why Isaac showed up here all those days ago. Scott cares about everyone and everything. He always has and he probably always will.

Not a full minute later, Isaac’s phone rings. “Speak of the devil,” he says, seeing Scott’s name on the caller ID. He answers, “Hi, Scott.”

“*Where are you?*” Scott asks. There’s stress and urgency in his tone.

“At home with your mom, why? Scott, what’s happening?” Isaac asks, sitting up a little straighter. His anxiety dials up to eleven.

“*There was a bomb at the sheriff’s station, and Argent and Derek were both there. They’re okay, but last I heard you were with Derek so I just—*” Scott stammers, cutting himself off.

“I’m okay,” Isaac says, infusing his voice with as much reassurance as he can muster. Then, “But there was an actual bomb? What’s going on?”

“*It was the nogitsune. He set the bomb and he framed Argent and Derek for the murder of Katashi,*” Scott says, laying out an unexpected influx of unfortunate events.

Isaac thinks back to the emitter at Derek’s loft. Isaac had brushed it off so casually, and Derek could have been killed because of it. Isaac should have known better. He should have known there was something bigger going on. He should’ve known.

“*Isaac, I have to go. The sun is about to set and the oni will be coming after Stiles, I just wanted to make sure you were okay,*” Scott says.

“Wait, Scott—”

Scott hangs up. Isaac’s fears about Stiles’ true identity and desperate pleas for more information die on his tongue.

Isaac sets his phone down, looking up at Melissa. She’s watching him with concern.

“There was a bomb at the police station and the nogitsune framed

Argent and Derek for murder,” Isaac says. As soon as the words are out of his mouth, the panic comes crashing down on him. He repeats, more hysterical this time, “There was a bomb at the police station and *Stiles* framed Argent and Derek for murder.”

Just a few hours ago, Derek was sitting at Isaac’s bedside, petting his hair. Now, he’s a murder suspect who just survived a bomb threat. Isaac’s head is spinning.

Isaac doesn’t allow himself a moment to breathe, just immediately starts trying to figure out the next step forward. Derek had broken Isaac out of jail before, if Isaac just knew how he–

“Isaac, I need you to calm down,” Melissa’s voice cuts through the flurry of thoughts. Her gentle tone is soothing. “Just breathe.”

Isaac gulps down shuddery breaths of air. *Why is breathing so hard today?* Isaac tries to think of his memories with Derek. Tries to anchor himself in the bonding moment they had in the hospital, in Derek coming back to Beacon Hills for him, in Derek saving his life. But all those memories do is add fuel to the fire. All they do is remind Isaac of what’s at stake, of what he could lose if the nogitsune, if *Stiles*–

Melissa places her hand over Isaac’s. Isaac’s eyes snap over to her, bringing his attention to the glowing yellow of his irises. Isaac takes another breath. He lets it fill his lungs, lets Melissa’s hand warm the chill in his veins.

It takes a moment, but, eventually, Isaac settles. The panic drops to nothing but a simmer, existing just below the surface. His eyes fade and his breathing regulates.

“This is just a minor setback, okay? It’s next to nothing by our standards,” Melissa says. She gives him a small smile, aiming for wry humor. It helps. “*Stilinski* will know they’re being framed, so he’ll do as much as he can from the inside.”

“Not if Special Agent Dickhead takes the case.” The words fumble out of Isaac’s mouth without thought. He’s too distracted by his own misery to realize what he’s saying until it’s too late. Though, as soon as his mind catches up with him, Isaac is slapping a hand over his mouth, completely mortified and full of regret.

But then, Melissa is laughing. Proper, full belly laughing. She pats her hand on Isaac’s knee, just two little taps, and, “You’ve been spending too much time with *Stiles*.”

Isaac doesn't have the standing to be offended by the accusation because Melissa's right. That's exactly where he got the nickname. He can't even deny it. He sighs, running his fingers through his hair, "I did *not* mean to say that."

"Please, Isaac, that just made my night," Melissa says, grinning.

"Happy to be of service," Isaac says, still feeling a little embarrassed. He tugs at his hair just a bit, just enough to sting, just enough to let out some of his frustration. Dejected, he says, "I was just starting to think my luck was turning around and now Derek might be going to prison."

"Well, we just have to adapt. We have to accept what happened, and find a way to fix it," Melissa reasons.

"Yeah, but... that's usually Stiles' job. He's always the one that figures it out," Isaac says.

It's ironic, really. Stiles is the one person they need the most right now. He would be their biggest asset against a dark, trickster spirit. He would give them a fighting chance. He would solve the riddle.

And yet, he's the one that's been taken off the board.

He's the one they're fighting now.

Echo House

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 20

Word count: 8,364

There's a knock at the door. It's only ten minutes after sundown. It can't be Scott, and he wouldn't knock anyway. Melissa and Isaac spare a glance. Cautiously, they make their way to the front door together.

Isaac holds his breath as Melissa slowly opens the front door.

It's Allison. She's standing on the front steps, looking unharmed but shaken.

"Hi, Allison. Scott's uh – Scott's not here," Melissa says, glancing between the two of them.

Allison pulls at the sleeves of her sweater, saying, "I'm actually here to see Isaac."

"Oh!" Melissa intones, sounding surprised but not unkind. "Then come on in," she says, opening the door for Allison, who steps inside the threshold. Melissa adds, "I'll get out of your way, just holler if you need me, okay?"

Melissa directs the question at both of them, but her eyes linger a little longer on Isaac. He gives her a nod and a soft, barely there smile. Then, Melissa heads upstairs while Isaac and Allison take to the living room.

Just before they sit down, Allison blurts out, "Can I hug you?"

Isaac stumbles slightly, quickly spinning around to face her. He's pretty sure his shock is plain as day, but he couldn't hide it if he tried. Still, he musters up a small, "Um. Yeah."

Allison steps around the coffee table. Isaac stands there awkwardly, just watching her. He can't remember the last time he hugged someone outside of a near death experience. Allison must know this because she moves in slowly. She approaches him like he's a scared animal who might spook easily, which, Isaac admits, is a little too on the nose. Allison carefully wraps her arms around Isaac's middle, and,

after a moment, Isaac gets with the program and wraps his around her shoulders.

It's... nice. Amazing, actually. Allison gently rests her head on Isaac's shoulder. Her hands are just barely moving along his back, just barely stroking. Isaac feels the tension flood from his body.

When Allison moves like she's going to break the hug, Isaac holds on a little tighter. *Just one more moment*, he pleads. Allison gives.

Isaac holds her and she holds him. And then, once Isaac has taken as much as he can without feeling awkward, he releases. He hasn't drunk his fill, has barely scratched the surface, actually, but it's enough. For now, it's enough.

Allison steps back. She flicks her eyes over Isaac, almost like she's inspecting him for damage, "I – um – I heard you were discharged and wanted to come see how you were doing."

"Yeah, I... I'm good," Isaac says as they sit down on the couch.

There's a pause between them. Not uncomfortable, but assessing. Isaac is still trying to figure out why Allison came all this way just to see him. If she wanted to check in on him, she would have just called. Then, like a light going on, it hits him.

"Your dad," Isaac says as soon as the realization hits. He curses himself for his lack of tact.

Allison looks down at her lap. She's tugging at her sleeves again. She looks up at him, making eye contact. "And Derek."

The reminder makes Isaac's heart stutter, but he ignores it in favor of saying, "Yeah. Guess this sucks for both of us."

"That's why I'm here," Allison says. "I mean, of course, I also wanted to see that you were okay, but... I don't know."

She looks tired and scared. Isaac is feeling it too. He feels almost guilty for not considering Allison's position in this sooner. Isaac and Allison are both at a standstill, just waiting to see if the most important person in their life is going to make it out. It's a horrible, helpless feeling.

"Melissa says the sheriff will know it's a trick, so he'll do what he can," Isaac says, aiming for reassurance, but it doesn't quite hit the

target.

Allison nods, “Yeah, I’m sure it’ll be okay, eventually, it’s just... it’s hard at the moment.”

In a single, jumbled sentence Allison has put Isaac’s thoughts into words. Sure, this will likely work itself out, but what do they do until then? They can’t just leave Derek and Argent there, waiting for the nogitsune to be defeated or the charges to be dropped. They can’t wait. They just can’t. They have to do something. They have to act and they have to do it soon.

“It feels completely out of our hands,” Isaac says.

“It’s an awful feeling,” Allison says. “I just couldn’t be at the apartment alone. I was going to Lydia’s and then I thought of you and, well, here I am.”

She sounds nervous. It’s unlike Allison to express her vulnerability so outwardly. It’s proof of just how much she’s struggling.

Isaac and Allison, though they come from completely different worlds, are alike in many ways. Both have been so fundamentally hurt by the people who were supposed to care about them unconditionally that, now, they have their walls up day and night. Vulnerability isn’t something either of them indulge in because they haven’t felt safe doing so.

Their situations aren’t comparable, but the outcomes are similar. And if Allison has experienced even a fraction of the hurt Isaac has, then maybe he should have held her a little tighter or a little longer. Maybe he should have never let her go.

“I’m sure you can hang out here for a bit. I think Scott will be home soon,” Isaac says. He doesn’t want to overstep any of Melissa’s boundaries, but Isaac can’t send Allison on her way. Not now. Allison needs his support, and Isaac needs hers. They need to lean on each other.

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Melissa comes back downstairs not long after. She doesn’t question Allison’s lingering presence, just offers to make them hot chocolate while they wait up for Scott. The sun set nearly an hour ago. Isaac’s not sure if he can handle waiting till morning.

Fortunately, he doesn't have to. The trio are halfway through their drinks when Scott comes in the door. He's soaking wet and the scent of blood trails in after him. Isaac is on his feet immediately, closely followed by Melissa and Allison.

Scott raises his eyebrows when he sees the latter. "Allison? What are you—"

"What happened?" Isaac interrupts. Ever since Scott hung up on him earlier, Isaac has been a bundle of nerves. He can't wait another second.

Scott looks over at Isaac. He spends a moment taking Isaac in, eyes roaming over his right side. It reminds Isaac that they haven't seen each other since he was released from the hospital. Still, Isaac has priorities. Number one being: why does Scott smell like blood?

"The nogitsune tricked us," Scott says. His voice is tired and weak, "It was never really Stiles. He – He attacked me at the animal clinic. If it wasn't for Deaton..." Scott trails off, leaving the rest of the sentence unspoken. Instead, he says, "Deaton managed to temporarily poison the nogitsune."

Isaac is starting to wish he hadn't kept his doubts about Stiles to himself. If he had, then maybe all of this could have been avoided. Maybe Derek and Argent wouldn't be locked up and maybe Scott wouldn't smell so sad. Although, the responsibility can't be entirely on Isaac's shoulders. Everyone except Scott seemed skeptical, and no one said anything. No one said anything and Scott got hurt. It's always Scott that gets hurt.

Nobody really knows what to say to Scott. They're all just standing by the door, watching him. Eventually, Scott says, "I'm going to go dry off. I'll be back down in a few."

Isaac wants to stop him, wants to ask him about Derek and the bomb, but he doesn't. It's not the time. Scott needs a breather. They all do.

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It isn't until the next night that action starts up again. It begins with Melissa letting slip that Stiles is being taken to Eichen House for a seventy-two hour hold.

"What?" Scott asks, voice painted with worry. "Why?"

It's just after sunset now. They haven't made any active progress, but, according to Scott, Deaton has spent the entire day trying to find a potential cure for Stiles.

It's not exactly the news Isaac is looking for.

It's not that Isaac doesn't care about Stiles. He does. So much. He wants nothing more than to get Stiles through this, but his focus is split. Half his energy is poured into Derek, worrying about his fate and safety. Isaac is distracted.

Maybe that was the nogitsune's goal. Maybe it wanted to spread them thin. If so, it's working.

"It's safer for *everyone* if Stiles is there," Melissa says. She doesn't look like she wholly believes it, but her heart rate doesn't change. Either she's gotten good at lying to werewolves, or she's convinced herself it's the truth.

"How? I can't protect him in there. I can't—" Scott huffs. He's pacing now, running his fingers through his hair. He's tugging at the ends, frantic. "I have to stop them. I have to go."

Before Melissa or Isaac can get another word out, Scott is making for the door.

"He's never going to change their minds," Melissa says. Isaac knows it to be true, but he also knows he can't change Scott's either. He can't stop him from trying, so he doesn't follow after him, as much as he might want to.

Truthfully, Isaac isn't sure how to feel about the plan. On one hand, Isaac understands where Scott is coming from. If Stiles is inside Eichen House, they lose control. There's nothing they can do to help him. On the other hand, however, if Stiles is roaming free, there's very little they can do to stop him either.

Isaac still hasn't seen Stiles. Not since the incident at the hospital. Honestly, Isaac doesn't think he's ready to see him yet, and Stiles probably isn't either. They aren't out of the woods yet, they're still in the thick of it. The nogitsune might be temporarily poisoned, but that's just it. It's temporary, and they have no way of knowing how long the lichen's effect will last.

Isaac isn't ready to see the real Stiles yet, so he certainly isn't ready to see him possessed by a dark spirit. That can wait another day or two,

at least.

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An hour later, Isaac's phone rings. It's Allison. Isaac answers, with a questioning, "Hey, Allison."

"Hi, Isaac. Scott and I are going to the animal clinic to meet Deaton, we're going to call my dad at the station. Do you want to come with? I can pick you up on my way," Allison offers.

Isaac, who feels like he's been waiting for this all day, instantly agrees. It might not be a phone call with Derek, but it's the closest thing Isaac is going to get at the moment. It'll have to be enough.

So, fifteen minutes later, Isaac is in Allison's car as she drives them to Beacon Hills Animal Clinic. At a red light, she says, "Sorry we can't talk to Derek too, it's just my dad has more information about Silverfinger and—"

"It's okay, Allison," Isaac says, cutting her off. It's not really a lie. Maybe deep down Isaac is feeling a bit jaded, but there's no alternative. It's out of his hands. There's nothing he can do about it, and neither can Allison. She's not at fault here.

Allison nods, keeping her eyes on the road. "Okay."

When they get to the clinic, Scott is already inside. He doesn't spare Allison a single glance, just keeps his attention firmly rooted on Isaac, and says, "I couldn't stop them."

Isaac isn't surprised. Scott is solid in his beliefs, he could lead a cat to battle, but he's not stubborn. At least, not in comparison to Stiles. Scott was never going to be able to sway him, especially not with the sheriff on board as well.

"Well... we'll just have to do everything we can from the outside," Isaac says, hoping to refuel Scott's determination. With direction, Scott can be unstoppable. They need that kind of willpower right now. They need the willpower of a true alpha.

"Isaac's right. We may not be able to do much while Stiles is inside Eichen, but we have three days to prepare," Deaton says. Then, "We have to wait for Argent to call us, but it should be any minute now."

The group of four stand in the entrance of the animal clinic, shrouded

in nervous tension as they wait. Isaac wishes someone would say something, but there's nothing to be said.

When the phone rings, Isaac flinches. Allison spares him a small, personal smile. He doesn't feel like she's laughing at him, though. Never does with Allison, honestly.

Deaton answers, and, as expected, it's Argent on the other line. Deaton puts the phone on speaker, and, maybe Isaac shouldn't, but he can't help himself. He just blurts out, "How's Derek?"

Isaac can feel the others looking at him, but he doesn't care. He needs to hear Argent say it. He needs to hear that Derek is okay. Isaac needs to get his head in the game, he needs to get focused, but he can't do that without this confirmation.

"Derek's fine," Argent says, it almost sounds like he's smiling. *"He saved my life when the bomb went off, but he's fully healed by now. He should be listening in."*

Isaac breathes an audible sigh, and says, "Okay."

Then, Isaac takes a small step back, distancing himself from the phone. He continues to ignore the eyes of the others, letting them get down to business. Isaac takes a small moment, just allowing himself a chance to breathe easily for the first time all day. Just a simple *"Derek's fine"* is all Isaac needed. Suddenly, a weight has lifted.

Isaac gets caught up in the relief flooding through his system, losing focus, but then there's an elbow digging into his side. It's not harsh, not intended to be painful or punishing, it's just a gentle nudge.

Isaac looks to his right where Scott is waiting for him with a soft, understanding smile. Isaac returns it, or, at least, he tries to. Scott tilts his head towards the phone, gesturing for Isaac to pay attention.

And so, Isaac does. He comes back to the present, hearing Argent ask, *"Did you have any trouble with Ikeda?"*

"Only minor," Deaton says. "The white wolf was exactly where you said it would be, but we have two problems now. First, the lichen is not a cure. It'll wear off in a matter of days."

"But while it does work, the oni won't go after Stiles, right?" Argent asks. His voice is hushed, almost muffled, like he's trying to go unheard in the police station. Considering the nature of their conversation, it's

not a bad idea.

“I hope. Eichen House has an unusual history. It might not be all that safe for the oni there as well,” Deaton says, which is just as reassuring as anything else he’s ever said. If Eichen isn’t safe for the oni, how safe is it going to be for Stiles? (Not to mention the fact that, as per usual, Isaac has a feeling Deaton isn’t telling them everything. Nobody in Beacon Hills seems to understand how dangerous not knowing can be. It’s beyond frustrating.)

“What’s the second problem?”

“I checked with your contacts in Japan. The yakuza boss you saw killed by the oni never found the scroll,” Deaton says.

“What scroll?” Scott asks.

“A Shugendo Scroll,” Deaton says. “The Shugendo were the ascetic mystics of Japan.”

“The scroll had information on how to exorcise a nogitsune,” Argent says, which is a much more helpful explanation than Deaton’s.

“So we need to find that scroll,” Scott says. Isaac can already see the fight in him starting to return. All he needs is direction.

“Exactly,” Deaton says, then speaks a little louder into the phone, “And I did get a name of the man who last purchased it. Kincaid.”

Isaac makes a small, involuntary noise of surprise. He looks over Scott’s head at Allison, seeing a similar recognition in her eyes. Isaac says, “He was with Katashi. He was the guy that met with me to buy the gun. The werewolf.”

“Sounds like Katashi wanted the scroll for himself,” Deaton says.

“But Stilinski already told me nothing like it was found among his things,” Argent says, sounding unsure, like he’s trying to fill in the gaps. *“And a paranoid like Katashi would keep it close. Probably on him at all times.”*

“What does a Shugendo Scroll look like?” Allison asks, like she has an idea.

Deaton stands, pulling an object from one of the drawers behind him. It’s an old looking scroll, tightly bound with pieces of twine and perfectly cylindrical. He hands it to Allison, saying, “Something like

this.”

“Do these come in different sizes?” she asks. Allison is definitely figuring something out, Isaac just doesn’t know what it is.

“Any size,” Deaton says, tone indicating his curiosity. (*Good, Isaac thinks, let him be out of the loop.*)

“Then I think I know where it might be,” Allison says. They all watch her, waiting for her to reveal her discovery. She pauses a beat, then says, “Katashi’s prosthetic.”

Isaac is so impressed. It would be on Katashi at all times, the shape is exactly the same, and no one would think to look inside the prosthetic. It’s the perfect hiding spot. Allison is a genius.

“The only problem is the prosthetic is evidence,” Argent says. *“The Feds have been sniffing around here all day. With the upcoming impeachment and the bomb, I wouldn’t be surprised if this became a federal investigation.”*

“You need to find out if it is or not,” Deaton says. “We need that information to determine how to move forward.”

“Between Derek and I, we should be able to figure it out. I’m running out of time. Be careful,” Argent says. He hangs up and silence falls over the group.

“You three should head home. There’s nothing more we can do now,” Deaton says. He directs his next statement to Scott, “I’ll let you know if I come up with anything here.”

Scott thanks Deaton and the three of them exit the clinic. There’s an unspoken agreement that Scott will be driving Isaac back to the McCall house, but, still, Isaac watches Allison. Thinking about her going back to an empty apartment, he can’t help but worry.

“Are you going to be okay tonight?” Isaac asks just as Allison is about to break off towards her car.

She stops in her tracks, looking back at Isaac. There’s a fondness in her eyes. “Yeah, Lydia’s coming over.”

Isaac nods. There’s an uneasiness lingering under his skin, but there’s not much else he can say or do. Isaac vows to himself to keep an eye on Allison until this is over. It’s the least he can do, really.

For now, though, Isaac climbs on the back of Scott's motorcycle and the pair return to the McCall house.

Once inside, Scott follows Isaac up to the guest bedroom. Part of Isaac wishes he wouldn't. He knows he's not being particularly subtle with how much he's worrying about Derek. He knows Scott is just doing his due diligence as the alpha, making sure Isaac isn't on the verge of collapse, but that doesn't mean Isaac has to be happy about it.

"Are you going to be okay tonight?" Scott asks. He's looking at Isaac with his usual brown-eyed intensity. All of Isaac's instincts are screaming at him to look away, but he doesn't. He fights to maintain eye contact.

Isaac decides being as honest as possible is the best route with Scott. So, he says, "I'll survive." Scott makes a face like he doesn't like that answer. Isaac sighs, and tacks on, "You have enough to worry about, Scott. Just go to bed."

"Just – you can talk to me, you know that, right?" Scott asks.

"Yeah, I know," Isaac nods. He sounds exhausted, but forces himself to continue, "I appreciate it, I really do. I just... I really don't feel like talking to anyone right now."

Scott seems to appreciate Isaac's candor because he says, "Yeah. Yeah, okay. Good night, Isaac."

"Good night, Scott."

—

The next day, mid-afternoon, Isaac gets a call from Allison.

"We were right. The Silverfinger case is being taken over by the FBI. They're moving the evidence tonight. Lydia and I are coming up with a plan, but we need you and Scott to meet us at the apartment," Allison says in a rush.

"Okay," Isaac says. "We'll be there shortly."

"Just a heads up, the twins are coming too." Allison says.

"What? No, Allison—"

"I don't trust them either, but we need all the help we can get," Allison argues.

"I don't think anyone trusts them, but Scott is so keen on second chances, they're just going to keep worming their way in," Isaac says. He sounds more put out than he intends to.

Allison breathes a small laugh, but says, *"Second chances aren't so bad. What if you had never given me a second chance? Or Derek?"*

Isaac huffs. He hates that she has a point. Still, he argues, "That's different."

"How?" Allison asks. She doesn't sound like she's baiting him to prove her right. She sounds genuinely interested.

Isaac shrugs. "I like you and Derek, I don't like the twins. You didn't kill anyone, the twins did."

"How do you know I haven't killed anyone?" Allison asks.

Isaac goes silent as the question hangs in the air. He can feel his eyebrows raising in surprise. He knew Allison had a brief history with the dark side, but he never thought—

Allison laughs.

"Oh, I hate you," Isaac says, but he might be laughing a bit too. The joke should've been obvious, but Isaac is out of it and blurred around the edges. Allison's laugh is definitely deserved, and Isaac finds he doesn't mind it. Allison pushes when other people would pull back. It feels nice. It feels familiar. (It sort of reminds Isaac of Erica or Stiles, but he can't think about either of them right now.)

Allison says, *"You already gave me a second chance. No take backs."*

"No take backs?" What are you nine? And, besides, you gave me a second chance too," Isaac says.

"I guess I did," Allison says, and it sounds like she might be smiling. *"Now, are you coming?"*

"Yeah, be there soon," Isaac says, then hangs up with a quiet goodbye.

Isaac walks down the hallway towards Scott's bedroom to deliver the information. He pauses just outside the door, taking a moment to listen for Scott's heartbeat. It's steady and even. Isaac gives a small knock.

"Come in!" Scott calls.

Isaac opens the door to find Scott at his desk, and, for just a second, Isaac is transported right back to that night. The night Derek kicked him out. The difference now, though, is Isaac is dry, he's not homeless, and Derek isn't a supernatural evil. The thought almost makes Isaac smile until he remembers why he's here in the first place.

"Allison just called. The Katashi evidence is being moved into a federal lockup tonight. We need to go," Isaac says. He keeps the nerves out of his voice, but he's certain Scott can smell it on him anyway.

Scott doesn't hesitate to push his chair away from the desk, asking, "Okay, where are we meeting?"

Tension is bubbling up around them, filling the room with something tangible and heady. It's not just Isaac's chemosignals. It's Scott's too. He wants to save Derek and Argent just as badly as Isaac does.

"The Argent apartment."

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When Scott and Isaac pull up at the apartment complex, a pair of familiar motorcycles are already there. And, unfortunately, so are their owners.

Scott and Isaac dismount his bike, and make their way towards the twins. Isaac watches Scott in anticipation, wondering if he's going to say anything to them. Isaac sort of hopes he will.

He doesn't. He dashes Isaac's hopes with a firm, "Come on, let's go."

The four of them take the elevator, and Isaac immediately regrets the decision. He should have just swallowed his pride and taken the stairs. The elevator is small and cramped and it's a horrible place to be locked inside with the evil twins. Especially considering they know all about Isaac's claustrophobia. After all, they were the ones who locked him and Allison in the janitor's closet, a ploy that was intended to hurt or kill her, no less. Although, no one else seems to remember or care about that.

Isaac can feel a small growl building in his chest, desperate to spill forth, but, luckily, the elevator dings and the doors slide open. Isaac steps out into the hallway and the growl dies in his throat.

The four of them approach the door to the Argent apartment, which is

almost immediately opened by Allison. She doesn't waste a single breath, just jumps right in, saying, "My father said all the Katashi evidence is being moved to a federal lockup by armored car tonight. Probably within the next few hours."

"We're going to rob an armored car?" Ethan asks, sounding incredulous. Isaac glances over at Allison and Lydia. There's no way *that's* the plan they've been coming up with. That's insane.

"Well, we're going to try," Lydia says. Because, of course, they are. Of course, they're going to try to rob an armored car. Why not? It's no more ridiculous than the plans Stiles—

Isaac needs to stop thinking about Stiles.

Allison and Lydia lead the group into Argent's office, taking a stand on either side of his desk. There's a map of Beacon Hills splayed out across the surface, decorated with markings and labels. Isaac and Ethan approach the desk while Aiden and Scott both take a seat.

Scott hangs his head, looking down in dismay. "This is a really bad plan."

Isaac wants to disagree, wants to be supportive, but it really is terrible. It barely counts as a plan at all. There's no substance, it's an idea at best. (At worst, it's an impulse decision that gets them all arrested, but they'll cross that bridge when they get there. *If* they get there.)

"It's not that bad," Lydia says, though she doesn't sound convinced.

"It's not that good," Isaac counters.

"None of us knows the route they're going to take," Lydia says, standing over the map and launching into a more detailed walkthrough. "If Allison can get one of her dad's GPS trackers on the armored car, then we can follow it."

"So when it gets here..." Allison points to the spot on the map marked as Roosevelt Bridge.

"We attack them," Aiden cuts in.

"No," Lydia turns on Aiden. "Your bikes will be in the middle of the road looking like you guys got into an accident." Her voice has tinted in that politely nasty way it used to, back when she dated Jackson and

pretended she was dumb. Isaac can't say he minds seeing it used on Aiden. She shifts her focus back to the map, continuing, "And when the driver gets out to help..."

"We attack him?" Aiden interrupts, again.

"No!" Lydia and Allison chorus. Then, Lydia explains, "You'll distract him and Scott and Isaac will break open the back door."

"We hope," Scott says, sounding hesitant and unsure. It's a valid feeling.

"And, you," Lydia looks at Isaac, "will get Katashi's finger."

This is Isaac's least favorite part of the plan. He has no idea why he's the one tasked with the most important, high risk job. Surely, there's someone more capable. Surely, they must realize Isaac is going to muck it up.

"It's not his actual finger, is it?" Ethan asks, like an idiot.

Lydia scoffs. "You are so out of our league."

"Why aren't we just going to Stilinski for help?" Ethan asks, once again, like an idiot.

"Because," Scott begins, "if he gets caught, then it's the sheriff tampering with federal evidence." Which would be bad at any given time, but in the middle of an impeachment investigation, it's career suicide.

"Guys, this is going to work. We *can* do this," Allison says, trying to be optimistic. "We're losing Stiles. My dad and Derek are in jail for murder. We *need* to do this."

Allison is right. (She usually is.) They don't have any other choice. If they want to save everyone, this is their only option. Even if it's the worst plan they've ever come up with, even if the odds are a million to one, they have to try. They have to.

With a (terrible) plan in place, the group disperses until later that night. Isaac offers to hang back and keep Allison company, wanting to make good on his promise to keep an eye on her, even if it was one he only made to himself.

“Are you worried?” Isaac asks once everyone has cleared out.

Allison is looking over the map of Beacon Hills, following the lines with her fingers. Isaac doesn't know exactly what she's looking for. Maybe some less obvious holes in their makeshift plan or alternate routes.

“A little bit,” Allison says without looking up.

“Me too,” Isaac admits. “It's just... this has to go perfectly, or we're only going to be making things worse for Derek and your dad, right? And when do our plans ever go perfectly?”

Isaac's been thinking about this nonstop. The plan is to distract the driver, break into the armored car and steal the scroll, then return the finger prosthetic without anyone ever knowing. If any one of those elements doesn't go smoothly, then the FBI could discover the evidence was tampered with, and then what? It leaves Derek and Argent worse off than before.

And Isaac knows they need to get the Shugendo Scroll, knows they need to save Stiles from the nogitsune, knows doing so will help everyone, including Derek and Argent. But...

Allison looks up. Her eyes are almost sad. “They're going to be okay, Isaac.”

“How can you be so sure?” Isaac asks.

“Because these things always work themselves out. Derek didn't go to prison when he was wrongly accused of killing his sister. He didn't go to prison when Scott and Stiles framed him for Peter's attacks as the alpha. *You* didn't go to prison when you were a suspect in your dad's murder. So,” Allison says, “they aren't going to go to prison now. Besides, there's no real evidence, especially against Derek. I mean, really, he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Stiles has framed Derek before?” Isaac asks. He hadn't known that.

“On accident,” Allison says with a small huff of a laugh. “That was actually more Scott than Stiles, though. At the time, they thought Derek was dead, so why not pin the murders on him?”

Isaac smiles, just something small. “And nothing bad happened to him?”

Allison shrugs. “He was a fugitive for a little while, but eventually they tied the murders to my aunt, and he was proven innocent.”

“Oh,” Isaac says.

“Oh,” Allison repeats. Then, “Do you want lunch? If I keep going over this plan, I’m going to lose any and all hope.”

“It really is a terrible plan,” Isaac says. “But, sure. Lunch sounds good.”

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Later, when the sun has just set, the group reconvenes. They meet up a little ways away from the sheriff’s station to run through the (terrible) plan one more time.

When Scott shows up, he isn’t alone. Kira is with him.

Isaac knows Scott trusts Kira, and, usually, that’s enough for Isaac to trust someone too. But not this time. Kira’s kitsune abilities were used to spark the nogitsune’s power inside Stiles. She might plead ignorance, but Isaac isn’t sure he believes it. She could easily be lying, and even if she was completely clueless, that doesn’t mean she isn’t partly responsible.

Isaac just doesn’t trust her. He doesn’t *really* know why, there’s just something about her. Something doesn’t feel quite right.

Still, Isaac doesn’t voice any of this. It isn’t the time. For now, he’ll just have to trust Scott’s judgment. For now, the (terrible) plan commences.

While Lydia and the twins wait around the corner near the main road, the other four crouch down between two cop cars in the parking lot of the sheriff’s station. They huddle together, watching the armored car and waiting for their opening.

Allison peers through the viewfinder of her bow, getting a closer look. When she deems the coast clear, she lowers the bow and tells Kira, “You’re up.”

Kira looks down at the GPS tracker in her hand, gives a small nod, and departs. She runs towards the armored car, keeping her footsteps light and quiet. Isaac, Allison, and Scott hold their collective breath as she places the tracker underneath the back of the car.

Kira looks over in triumph, but it doesn't last long. The back door of the police station creaks open and a deputy walks out.

Any and all victory dims from Kira's eyes as they widen into shock. She ducks around the side of the vehicle, hiding behind one of the wheels. It's a horrible hiding spot, but there's nowhere else to go. She's stuck.

"Okay, let's get out of here," the deputy says as he opens the passenger side door. Upon closer examination, Isaac realizes he's met the deputy before. It's Parrish, the young officer who helped them track down Stiles' Jeep the night he sleepwalked into the coyote den.

Scott is watching Kira, but Isaac is watching the deputy. He watches as Parrish goes still, pulling out his gun. Isaac watches as he rounds the armored car. Parrish is creeping around the vehicle, getting closer and closer to spotting Kira. She's screwed. There's no way Parrish isn't going to see her.

Scott whispers, "We have to do something."

But someone else beats them to it. The back doors of the armored car fly open and a familiar giant of a man jumps out. He grabs onto Parrish, and, in the blink of an eye, has his head slamming against the metal of the car. The deputy falls to the ground, out like a light.

The man stands, towering over Parrish's limp body. He's even bigger than Isaac remembers.

"Who the hell is that?" Scott asks.

Isaac breathes, "Kincaid."

Isaac, Scott, and Allison stand, preparing to face off against the giant werewolf. Allison quickly ties her hair back and loads an arrow into her bow. She holds it steady, no signs of shaken confidence or hands.

Slowly, all three approach Kincaid. He's digging around in the back of the armored car, and when he resurfaces, it's with the small, silver prosthetic in his grip. It glistens in the dim light of the vehicle.

"We need that finger," Scott says with Allison and Isaac on either side of him, protecting him.

When Kincaid turns his attention onto them, he doesn't look at all fazed. He doesn't look surprised, and he certainly doesn't look scared.

He looks calm. And when he glances between the three of them, he smirks.

Isaac wonders if he even remembers them from the gun deal. He probably does. He probably remembers overpowering Isaac with ease, holding his claws over Isaac's throat. That's probably why he's so smug.

"Why should I give it to you?" Kincaid asks, deep voice booming.

Allison doesn't hesitate. She's quick to say, "There's a briefcase in there with \$150,000 in it."

"The scroll inside this finger prosthetic finger is worth three million," Kincaid says, which, first of all, that's an absurd out of money. Second of all, it's a rookie mistake on Kincaid's part. Kincaid had no way of knowing that they were here specifically for the scroll, and yet, he's just revealed its location.

Maybe Kincaid is underestimating them. Maybe they can use that to their advantage. Maybe they do stand a chance.

"Give me the finger," Scott says. His tone is meant to be strong-willed and intimidating, but the words undermine his effort and dilute some of the tension. Isaac has to hold back a snort. This is all so ridiculous. Scott stammers, backpedaling, "You know what I mean."

Out of nowhere, Kira leaps down off the back of the car, landing on Kincaid. It's another rookie movie. She wraps her arms around his neck, but there's no point. Kincaid tosses her to the side as easily as swatting away a fly. Kira hits the ground hard, panting, but Kincaid is completely unbothered. He didn't break a sweat, his heart rate didn't even jump.

Kincaid slides into a crouch, like he's preparing to pounce. His eyes glow blue and his mouth fills with teeth, featuring more fangs than Isaac has ever seen a werewolf have.

"I guess negotiations are over," Kincaid says. Then, he releases an epic, bellowing growl. It echoes through the parking lot, burning past Isaac's ears.

Maybe Kincaid isn't underestimating them. Maybe they don't stand a chance.

It doesn't matter. They have to fight. They need that scroll.

Isaac anchors himself in that motivation, in the need to save his pack, and then he uses it to shift. He lets the transformation tear through his body. Claws force their way through his fingertips, canines slide into place, his face twists and contorts, and his usual blue eyes are taken over by a golden glow. Power floods Isaac's body. He's ready to fight.

Immediately, Allison fires an arrow. It pierces Kincaid's left shoulder, just above his heart. The impact causes his upper body to rotate backwards, but he recovers quickly. With minimal effort, Kincaid pulls the arrow out of his joint. He looks at it with disgust before tossing it to the ground.

Again, Kira goes after Kincaid. She swings, but Kincaid blocks the movement, grabbing her by the throat. He holds her just above the ground, he has her life in his hand, but he's not aiming to kill. Again, he throws Kira out of the way. It'll hurt, but she'll survive.

Then Kincaid backhands Allison across the face.

He hits hard. Allison's body does a full spin before she crashes into a brick wall. She falls to the ground, and, for a moment, she doesn't move.

Scott's reaction is fueled by anger. He runs towards Kincaid, fighting hard against him. Isaac's reaction is fueled by fear, he runs towards her prone form, yelling, "Allison!"

Isaac falls to his knees next to Allison. Her heart is beating evenly and she's stirring. She's okay. She's shocked and definitely a little hurt, but she's okay.

Isaac quickly tucks his arm around Allison, helping her to her feet. Isaac looks around in frantic flicks of his eyes. He needs to get Allison out of here. He needs to get her to safety, but Scott is still fighting Kincaid. Isaac can't leave him.

Kincaid is tearing Scott apart. Scott might be a true alpha, but the sheer size of Kincaid seems almost unbeatable. He has Scott's arms pinned to his side, rendering him helpless. Isaac wants to run to him. He wants to help, but Allison is swaying against his side.

Then, Allison gently nudges her elbow into his side. Isaac reluctantly tears his eyes away from the fight, meeting hers. She gives him a small nod and an even smaller push forward.

So, Isaac goes.

Just as Kincaid is bashing his own skull into Scott's, forcing him back a step, Isaac runs in. With the element of surprise working in his favor, Isaac actually manages to land a hit. He swipes his claws up Kincaid's side, gouging in as deep as he can. Isaac might not have brute strength, but he can fight dirty. He'll scratch and bite and kick until he sees blood.

The only problem is: Isaac has to get close to do that kind of damage. Which means, once again, he's gotten himself into a brawl with Kincaid and can't utilize his greatest asset. Isaac probably should have thought this through before he ran in to save Scott's ass because, now, he's the one that needs saving.

Once again, Kincaid overpowers Isaac like it's nothing. He grabs hold of Isaac's wrists, gripping them tight. It seems like Kincaid is about to pull the same move he just used against Scott – pinning his arms to his side and bashing their heads together – but it's a mistake. Isaac can anticipate it, and that gives him a fighting chance.

Isaac struggles hard to keep his arms held straight out in front of him, not letting them fall to his sides. Isaac squirms. He twists and rotates his own arms until they hurt, pushing past his natural flexibility just enough to sink his claws into Kincaid's forearms. He digs in hard. He can feel the skin breaking. He can feel blood dripping onto his claws, painting his hands with red.

Kincaid lets go. Isaac smirks, feeling a smugness of his own.

But then, Kincaid's claws slice into Isaac's left shoulder, dragging down his chest. Isaac cries out at the impact, but Kincaid doesn't stop there. He immediately follows the scratch with a swift kick to the side of Isaac's knee, sweeping his legs out from under him. Isaac is forced to the ground, and, not expecting the sudden blow, his face collides with the concrete.

Kincaid steps over Isaac's weakened body, but he's not free of them yet. Scott isn't giving up. Isaac held on long enough to give Scott a chance to catch his breath and ready himself. He's reinvigorated. He hits harder. He fights more aggressively.

Isaac struggles to prop himself up, unable to move his left arm. His shoulder is torn up, not just from Kincaid's claws, but the collision with the concrete too. Isaac is pretty sure it's dislocated.

Isaac can't get up, so he can only watch in horror as the fight unfolds.

Scott slams punch after punch into Kincaid, but with zero effect. Kincaid doesn't flinch, the impact doesn't even move him. Isaac remembers fighting Ennis. He remembers fighting the joined form of the twins. This is something similar. It's like fighting a brick wall. Scott can punch as hard as he wants, but Kincaid isn't going anywhere.

It's almost like Kincaid is humoring Scott, like he's letting him tire himself out. He's *letting* Scott attack him until, eventually, Kincaid snaps. He dodges Scott's next punch, and, instead, greets him with one of his own. Kincaid lands a solid hit against Scott's stomach. He double overs. Kincaid slams his fists into Scott's back. He crumbles to the ground. Kincaid kicks him hard in the ribs.

Scott rolls over onto his back. His breathing comes out wheezing and ragged. He's visibly struggling. He's hurt. Isaac wants to help him, but he can't. He feels a little fuzzy around the edges after hitting the ground face first, and his shoulder can't heal until it's back in place. Isaac can't do anything. He can't fight. He can't help. He can't get up. He can't move.

Kincaid crouches down, peering over Scott. "You have the eyes of an alpha, but where's the strength?"

"Up here," the distinct voice of one of the twins calls out.

Isaac looks up to see them standing at the top of the metal staircase attached to the station. They must have heard the fight and come running. As much as Isaac doesn't like them, he has to admit, the added strength might not be such a bad thing.

The twins leap over the banister, jumping down onto Kincaid. The twins might not be able to merge together anymore, but they have a lifetime of experience surviving together, and it really does give them an edge. The pair fights as a tight unit, perfectly in-sync at every moment. They're a force of nature, easily matching Kincaid's strength with consecutive strikes. It's a sight to behold.

The twins serve as a prominent distraction, giving Isaac the opportunity to struggle to his feet. He one-handedly pushes himself up, finding that he isn't so dizzy anymore and his knee has healed enough to keep him upright. Isaac moves slowly, hobbling out of the line of fighting. He limps towards Allison who has since been joined by Lydia.

"My shoulder's dislocated," Isaac says, keeping his voice low.

"I'm too weak right now, you're going to have to do it," Allison says, cutting right to the case and speaking directly to Lydia.

"Do what?" Lydia asks, voice high and alarmed. Isaac has a feeling they both already know what's about to happen, and he's looking forward to it just as much as Lydia.

"Pop his shoulder back in," Allison says, like it's nothing. She's leaning her weight heavily against Lydia and the brick wall, but her voice is steady.

"I don't know how to do that!" Lydia exclaims.

Isaac hushes her. Kincaid might be distracted for the moment, but they don't want to draw his attention. Isaac spares a quick glance to the fight, seeing Scott still incapacitated and the twins still holding their own.

"You just have to pull his arm straight forward as hard as you can," Allison says. Then, aiming for reassurance, "I promise, it *will* work."

Lydia still looks terrified, so Isaac tacks on, "As soon as it's back in, everything will heal. Just do it."

Lydia takes a deep, shaky breath, nodding rapidly. There's a frazzled look in her eyes, but her movements are calculated. She takes hold of Isaac's left wrist, lifting his arm straight out in front of him as instructed.

She pulls.

For a moment, it's agony. Isaac bites down as hard he can, trying to contain the instinctive urge to shout. He's pretty sure his eyes are glowing gold, and the primal part of him wants to rip free and lunge at Lydia.

But then, the joint slides back into place with a sickening pop. Instantly, the pain fades away and his eyes dim to blue.

Lydia lets go of Isaac's wrist, looking at him with that same scared look. Slowly, Isaac rolls his shoulder, testing the movement. Nothing horrible happens. The pain stays away and the joint moves as expected.

Isaac releases a smiling exhale, "You did it."

"I did it," Lydia repeats, sounding surprised.

Isaac is about to thank her when Scott yells, "Stop! Ethan, Aiden!"

The fight returns to the forefront of Isaac's mind and attention. Scott is finally stable enough to get up off the ground. He's pushing himself to his feet, trying to stop the twins. And Ethan and Aiden... They aren't just fighting Kincaid anymore, they're killing him.

"Stop!" Lydia shrieks, running over.

"You want him to come after us?" Aiden questions.

Kincaid is kneeling on the ground, face smeared with blood and panting for breath.

"Scott, we've seen guys like this. Trust us: he's dangerous," Ethan says. *Trust us. Ha. That's rich.*

"So are we," Scott says. He stands in front of Kincaid, and, now, he's the one towering above. They're all circled around him. They're battered and bruised, but they're relentlessly stubborn. They never give up. "And he looks smart enough to remember that."

Scott reaches forward, plucking the silver finger from Kincaid's jacket pocket. He tips the contents of the prosthetic into his hand. A scroll, no longer than an inch and tied up with red string, falls into Scott's palm. He spares Allison a small, proud smile.

Then, Scott turns back to the twins. "We're here to save a life. Not end one."

Scott drops the prosthetic to the ground, and that's it. They turn and walk away, leaving Kincaid kneeling on the ground with nothing but a useless piece of silver.

—

"How's your shoulder?" Scott asks, deeper into the night when it's just the two of them back at the McCall house.

"Oh, it's fine," Isaac says, rolling it. "Lydia did a great job."

"Well, can't say I'm surprised," Scott says with a smile. Then, "I'm going to go bring the scroll to Deaton to be translated. Will you come with me?"

“Sure,” Isaac says. He’s a little bit taken aback by the question, but tries not to show it. These are usually the things that Scott does on his own, but Isaac appreciates the offer. It makes him feel included. It makes him feel trusted.

So, the two of them go to the animal clinic where Deaton is already expecting them. They watch and wait with barely concealed impatience as Deaton slowly and carefully unfurls the tiny scroll. Deaton holds it up to the light, peering at it with great concentration.

“There isn’t much here unfortunately,” Deaton says, after a moment, which of course there isn’t. They only risked life and limb to get it. Literally.

“Does it say anything?” Scott asks, taking a small step closer.

“My Japanese isn’t great,” Deaton says, looking up at Scott, then back at the scroll. “But it appears to say that one method of expelling a nogitsune is to change the body of the host.”

“Change the body?” Scott repeats quietly, like he’s thinking it over.

“Which begs the question,” Deaton says, “how do we change Stiles’ body?”

Slowly, like the sun rising outside, understanding starts to dawn on them. With it comes a great feeling of unease, a feeling like something horrible and inevitable is right around the corner, and they’re lying in wait for it.

“By turning him into a werewolf,” Scott says. It’s almost begrudging, but he doesn’t have the heart to fuel the feeling.

It sounds simple enough, but Isaac wonders... he wonders if Scott knows what Isaac does. Stiles was offered the bite once before, but he turned it down. He never *wanted* to be a werewolf. The bite is a gift, but it’s also supposed to be a choice.

Which begs the question: are they allowed to violate Stiles’ autonomy to save his life and countless others?

The Fox and The Wolf

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 20

Word count: 4,119

It's mid-morning when Isaac hears the front door open. He doesn't intentionally strain his ears to listen in, but, naturally, he can hear the muffled voices of Scott talking to someone. Isaac doesn't recognize the second voice, and it could be no one, but it could also be something important.

So, Isaac waits until he hears the door click closed, and then he makes his move. He jogs down the stairs to see Scott standing in the entryway. He's wearing an expression of shock and holding what appears to be an ancient sword in his right hand.

"Scott?" Isaac questions, approaching almost cautiously.

"That was Malia," Scott says, gesturing towards the door with the hand not holding a weapon. "She was at Eichen with Stiles. He's missing. Again."

Isaac's eyebrows raise in surprise. The lichen must have worn off much faster than they originally thought. Stiles was *supposed* to have another twenty-fours until the end of his three day stay at Eichen. They were *supposed* to have time to figure this out. And yet, they're still no closer to coming up with a cure. And now, Stiles is missing. Again.

Isaac is about to say something – something reassuring and pointless – when he notices just how distracted Scott is. He's staring down at a small, square piece of paper. He's entranced by it.

"What is that?" Isaac asks, taking a small step closer.

"Malia gave it to me, along with this sword. She said she and Stiles found it inside one of the walls of Eichen's basement," Scott explains. Then, he slowly holds out the piece of paper, revealing its true identity. It's a picture. A picture of what looks to be Kira and soldier, though it's printed in sepia tones and the pair are donned in old fashioned clothes. Not only that, the physical copy of the image is

worn and delicate. Like the sword, it's antiquated.

"Is that-?"

"I have no idea," Scott says. "It looks just like her, though, right?"

"Right," Isaac says. He forces himself to look away from the picture, not liking the foreboding feeling it lodges in his chest.

"I should go talk to her," Scott says.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Isaac asks. Usually, he wouldn't question Scott's judgment, but this feels like such a risk. It's not just Kira that Isaac doesn't trust, and it's not just Malia that saw this image. Stiles saw it too. Except, Stiles isn't really Stiles any more. He could have the same idea as Scott. This could be another trick.

"I have to," Scott says. Isaac knows he's right, knows they have to explore every possible lead, but that doesn't mean he has to like it. Isaac is about to offer to come along, feeling safer with Scott in his sight, when Scott adds, "You should stay here and wait for news on Argent and Derek. They should be getting released today."

"What?" Isaac asks, feeling his heart skip a beat in his chest.

Scott nods, a hint of a smile playing at his features. "I didn't want to tell you until it was a sure thing, but Stilinski should be able to get them out today. So keep your phone on, yeah?"

"Yeah, of course, always," Isaac says. He can feel his own smile spreading across his features. He can't fight it. The relief is such a tangible thing, Isaac can practically taste it.

Derek's going to be okay.

—

When Isaac's phone rings, lit up with Derek's name, he almost drops his phone in excitement. He fumbles with it for a moment, scrabbling to catch it midair, then answers, "Hello? Derek?"

"*Hey, Isaac,*" Derek's voice comes through the speaker. There's nothing particularly special about Derek's voice. It's the same as always, gruff and monotone, but, still, it centers something in Isaac. "*Stilinski got the charges dropped.*"

"That's it? Everything's sorted?" Isaac asks. It sounds too good to be

true.

“Everything is sorted,” Derek confirms. Then, *“Argent and I are going to work with Stilinski to find and trap Stiles. Can you help?”*

“Yeah, sure,” Isaac says, not really thinking about it. To be honest, Isaac is eager to get out of the house and offer assistance where he can. Besides, he really wants to see Derek.

“Can you meet us at the Argent apartment, or do you need a ride?” Derek asks.

Isaac could probably do with a ride, but he doesn’t mind. “I’ll just meet you there.”

“Are you just saying that because you think it’s more convenient?” Derek asks.

“No comment. See you soon!” Isaac says before immediately hanging up.

Isaac rushes around the McCall house for a few minutes, making sure he has everything prepared. He already ate lunch, he’s dressed. There isn’t much else to do, so Isaac heads out.

He’s halfway out the door when an SUV marked with *Beacon County Sheriff* pulls up outside. Isaac just barely resists the urge to turn tail and run out the back door, if only because that would be far more embarrassing.

Derek rolls down the window, looking smug. Isaac hates him just a little bit at the moment, but, mostly, he’s just happy to see him.

And so, Isaac swallows his wounded pride and climbs in the back of the car alongside Derek. He can’t help but notice that Argent is the one riding upfront with the sheriff, and after the stunt he just pulled, Isaac doesn’t feel any remorse in seizing the opportunity to rag on Derek.

“Did Mr. Argent call shotgun?” he asks with a smiling, teasing lilt.

“I hate you,” Derek says, completely deadpan.

“Yeah, yeah, good to see you too,” Isaac says, unfazed.

And that’s it. There’s no big, grand reunion, and Isaac is glad for it. Isaac and Derek already know where they stand with each other. They

don't need to have a dramatic heart-to-heart every time they're separated. They'd never get anything done if they did.

Instead, they fall back into their usual banter without missing a step. It's uncomplicated. It's simple. It's easy.

When they get to the Argent apartment, Allison is ready for them. She leads them through to Argent's office where, laid out on the desk, is an impressive array of all sorts of weapons. Ropes, chains, handcuffs, and the like. Allison says, "This is everything non-lethal I could find."

"Take all of it," Argent says. From an outside perspective, it might seem a little overboard, but they have no idea what they're getting themselves into trying to trap a nogitsune. They may as well come prepared.

Allison immediately starts packing the weapons into a duffel bag, but Isaac is more focused on the heavy atmosphere around them. The room is thick with tension and dread. The energy is frantic. They're rushing, but they don't have any other choice. They only have until sunset to find Stiles. To find Stiles *first*.

It's not enough time. It never is.

"What's the plan here?" Sheriff Stilinski asks.

"Our best shot right now is for Derek and Isaac to try to pick up Stiles' scent at Eichen House, especially if he went through something stressful there," Argent says.

"Should all five of us be going to the same place?" Stilinski asks. He brings up a good point. Their time is severely limited, so it might be best to stretch their resources thin and cover as much ground as possible.

"Where else has Stiles been showing up?" Argent asks.

"School," Allison says.

"The hospital," Isaac adds, unable to suppress the shiver that runs through him at the thought. He can still remember the feeling of electricity pulsing in his veins, hammering at his skin to fight its way out. Isaac's not sure he'll ever forget that feeling.

“Okay, hold on. We did this already,” Derek cuts in. “He disappeared. We started looking for him. Then walked right into a trap at the hospital.”

He’s looking at Isaac. Derek is remembering it too, and he’s worried. He’s worried because of what happened to Isaac. He’s worried for Isaac. (It shouldn’t be a difficult concept to grasp, but Isaac can’t quite wrap his head around the negative impact his injury had on Derek. It’s strange. Isaac knows he’s cared for, at least to a certain extent, but to see such obvious proof of it... It catches Isaac off guard.)

“He’s getting us to repeat the same moves,” Argent says. The nogitsune is twisting them around in circles, and there’s nothing they can do. They have no choice but to play his game. If they don’t, it’s Stiles’ life at stake.

“Then what do we do? Wait for him to come to us?” Allison asks.

“We can’t. Not if the oni find him when the sun goes down,” Derek says. And that’s the problem, isn’t it? If they don’t find Stiles, then the oni will. They don’t have the luxury of waiting for Stiles to come to them. They can’t take that risk. They have to look for him.

“Scott’s working on that right now, with Kira,” Isaac says. As they speak, Scott and Kira are with Kira’s mom, who seems to know more about this than anyone else. They’re trying to get answers out of her; though, like most of the adults in Beacon Hills, she won’t be a very willing participant.

“That’s the problem,” Argent says, “we’re all trying to outfox the fox.”

The room goes quiet as the gravity of the situation hits. It weighs down on their shoulders, forcing them to a halt, forcing them to look their hopelessness dead in the eye.

They’re trying to do the impossible. They’re trying to beat the nogitsune at his own game. They’re trying to trick the trickster.

“Listen,” Stilinski says, noticing the drop in mood, “I’ll understand if anyone wants to back out.”

Isaac looks around. Stilinski is giving them permission to walk away, completely unharmed. He’s giving them an out, but no one is going to take it. No one *wants* to take it. Isaac certainly doesn’t.

Derek breaks the silence, “Well, I’m not going to be the first wolf to

run from a fox.”

Isaac grabs the final taser, loads it into the duffel, and says, “Me neither.”

“Apparently I’m carrying a lightsaber,” Argent adds in lieu of a proper agreement.

“Dad, you, me, and Derek hit Eichen House. Sheriff, it’s you and Isaac at the hospital,” Allison says, doling out orders. It suits her. Being in charge, that is.

Isaac’s a little hesitant about returning to the scene of his accident – *can it really be considered an accident?* – but he doesn’t protest. He can’t avoid the hospital forever.

Honestly, Isaac’s more put off by the idea of parting ways with Derek so soon, but he knows their werewolf abilities are both needed. This isn’t about doing what they’re comfortable with, this is about doing everything they possibly can to succeed and save Stiles. And so, that means Isaac and Derek have to split up. The more they spread out their firepower, the better.

Derek gives Isaac a pointed look, and whispers, “Be careful.”

Isaac can hear his own hesitancy reflected in Derek’s voice, the same fear of sending Isaac back to the hospital. But they have to do this. So, Isaac just nods, and whispers, “Yeah. You too.”

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This is so awkward. *Isaac* is so awkward. Who decided it was a good idea for the sheriff and Isaac to be alone together? Isaac takes back everything he thought about Allison being a good leader. This was a terrible decision.

They’re in the hospital elevator – already off to a bad start – and it’s so quiet. It’s stilted and silent apart from the whirring of mechanics. Isaac can’t think of a single thing to say. The awkwardness is eating at him, grinding at his bones and making him want to scream. It’s stifling. It makes the space feel even smaller, even more cramped. Isaac tries to keep his composure, but he’s hanging on by a thread.

Suddenly, the sheriff says, “You know, I never properly apologized for what happened after your father died.”

Isaac freezes. *No*. Now is not the time for this conversation. In fact, this is the worst time. Isaac can't talk about his dead dad, not here, not now.

When Isaac doesn't say anything, the sheriff continues, "I *am* sorry. You shouldn't have had to go through that."

Isaac nods. He doesn't look at Stilinski. He can't. He has no idea how he's supposed to respond.

"And I never thanked you either," Stilinski says, like he's only just realizing it. "You saved my life. *Thank you*." He just keeps talking. "I don't know how you kids do it. You're so strong." Isaac kind of wants him to shut up. "You're fearless."

Isaac splinters. His next breath comes in a little shaky, a little wet. *Oh, great*. This is really not the time. Isaac's eyes are tearing up. He's—

Stilinski stops the elevator.

A jolt of panic runs through Isaac's body. Immediately, his tears spill over and his heart rate skyrockets.

"Hey," Stilinski says. "I know you have a thing about small spaces, but you need a moment of privacy, okay? Just take a second to collect yourself."

Isaac can't. The tears have started, and they won't stop.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Isaac says, profusely. *He* kind of wants to shut up, but he can't. "I'm not – I'm not fearless. I'm scared *all the time*. Erica and Boyd are dead, and I'm terrified that I'm next. I've almost been next. More than once. I – I have no idea what I'm doing, and I'm constantly scared that someone is going to figure it out. Someone is going to realize that I'm not good at this. *I can't help*. I'm terrified. I can't even get in an elevator most days. I'm – I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

The sheriff hushes Isaac gently. He slowly approaches, keeping his hands in view. And then, his arms are wrapped around Isaac's middle, and it just makes everything worse. Isaac isn't used to this. Isaac isn't good at this. Isaac can't handle kindness. It makes his skin crawl and his heart stop. He's waiting for it to disappear, waiting for it to turn cruel and punishing.

Isaac isn't good at this.

“You’re okay,” Stilinski says. “You’re okay.”

Isaac kind of wants the doors to open unprompted. He kind of wants Sheriff Stilinski to stop touching him. He kind of wants to scream.

But, also, he kind of never wants this to end. If Isaac closes his eyes tight enough, if he stretches his imagination, he can almost pretend it’s his dad that’s hugging him. The thought hurts, it’s ripping him apart, but he can’t stop his mind from going there. It always does.

Isaac curls his fist into the material of Stilinski’s jacket. It’s a little bit scratchy, but the sensory stimulation is good. It’s grounding.

After a moment, Isaac opens his eyes. The fantasy falls away. It’s just him and Sheriff Stilinski standing in an elevator, hugging.

Eventually, Isaac’s breathing calms and Stilinski pulls away, though he doesn’t go far. He keeps a hand on Isaac’s shoulder, looking at him so intently. His eyes are blue, not brown, but they have a familiar glint. Isaac can see Stiles in those eyes, and it makes his chest hurt.

Stilinski lets go and properly steps back, giving Isaac space. He wipes his eyes. He feels so embarrassed. He feels so small and so stupid. He says, “I’m not – I’m not used to being treated like this.”

Stilinski’s face twists into an expression of anger. Maybe Isaac shouldn’t have said that. It’s the type of statement that, by now, he should know better than to share. It’s the type that only ever brings him pity.

But then, Stilinski doesn’t apologize. “You’re allowed to be scared. Fear is a good thing. It keeps us alive. As long as you don’t let it take over,” Stilinski says. His voice is firm, but it’s coated in warmth. The words drape over Isaac like a soft blanket, comforting him. Then, he adds, “You have nothing to apologize for, okay?”

“Okay,” Isaac says, nodding shakily.

Stilinski turns to restart the elevator, finger an inch away from the button, when his phone buzzes. His hand drops to his pocket, pulling it out. As soon as Stilinski sees the screen, he goes completely still.

“What is it?” Isaac asks.

“Someone’s breaking into my house,” the sheriff says. He navigates his phone, opening up another app, explaining as he does, “After Stiles

started sleepwalking, I had some security precautions put in. Motion sensors. Cameras.”

The app loads, and a familiar sight reveals itself. Isaac leans a little closer, getting a better look, “Is that his room?”

Stilinski presses a button and the camera zooms in a little closer.

Stiles is sitting on his bed. Except, it’s not really Stiles. Even through the grainy lens of the camera, the shift in demeanor is obvious. Even through the phone, it’s terrifying. A chill runs down Isaac’s spine.

It’s the nogitsune.

Void Stiles slowly raises his hand. He waves.

—

After calling Derek to inform him of Stiles’ location, the two groups rush to the Stilinski household, desperately trying to catch Stiles before he disappears again.

Of course, they’re too late. They run into Stiles’ room, but it’s empty. Stiles is nowhere to be found. The only evidence left in his wake is the security camera footage and the chessboard.

Isaac notices it first. It’s the same chessboard Stiles used to teach his dad about the supernatural. It’s decked out with all the same pieces, except they’ve all been rearranged to tell a new story.

Naturally, the group gathers around the one piece of tangible evidence.

Upon closer inspection, Isaac notices a new piece among the others. *Lydia*. Isaac doesn’t know enough about chess to discern the meaning of her piece’s placement, but the fact that she’s been added is important. It must be.

“What are these sticky notes for?” Argent asks, pointing to the board.

“This is what Stiles used to try and explain to me about all of...” Stilinski looks around at the group, “you.”

“Well, maybe it’s a message from Stiles,” Allison says. “The real Stiles.”

It’s a nice thought, but Isaac is skeptical. He wants to be hopeful, but

he's not. There was something about the way Stiles looked at that camera earlier. There was no trace of the real him, there was only something purely evil. Something dark and sinister.

"You think there's any reason why my name is on the king?" Derek asks, which, at first, Isaac thinks is so typical. Of course, that's what Derek is worried about. But, in taking a closer look, Isaac notices all the pieces seem to be surrounding Derek's. Even Isaac's, the measly pawn, is only one space away from the king.

"Well, you're heavily guarded," Stilinski says. "Though I guess the alarming detail is that... you're one move from being in checkmate."

"It's not a message from Stiles. It's a threat from the nogitsune," Argent says.

It's a threat, and Derek is the target.

Isaac struggles to keep the rising tide of fear at bay. He has to stay level headed. Stilinski was right, earlier in the elevator, fear *can* keep you alive, but not this time. The nogitsune feeds off chaos, strife, and pain. The only thing Isaac's fear does is give him ammunition.

So, Isaac takes a breath, and calms. With it, comes clarity. If this is a threat and Derek is the intended target, then there's only one place Stiles could be.

"He's at the loft, that's what he's trying to tell us," Isaac says, not even a little bit surprised. Everyone is always at the loft. Isaac turns to Derek, says just above a whisper, "I told you: you need a better security system."

"Not now, Isaac," Derek says, but there's a small, barely there smile at the corner of his lips. Isaac smirks, feeling just a little bit proud.

"He wants us to come there," Argent says, ignoring them entirely.

"Night's falling," Derek says, reminding them of the time limit. There's maybe an hour until darkness falls on Beacon Hills. There's no time.

"This couldn't sound anymore like a trap," Argent warns.

"I don't think it is," Stilinski argues.

The two men stand firm, making steady eye contact. Isaac watches, waiting for one of them to give. He agrees that it's probably yet

another trap, but he also knows they don't have any other choice but to walk into it willingly. They have to go to the loft. They have to play the nogitsune's game.

"I think your opinion might be slightly biased, Sheriff," Argent says, which is a fair criticism. Isaac's not convinced Stilinski would be so optimistic if it wasn't Stiles they were trying to save. But, maybe, that will work in their favor. Maybe Stiles was the wrong person to possess. Maybe Stiles' connection with everyone he meets, his inability to have a casual relationship, his widespread influence... Maybe that will be the nogitsune's fatal flaw.

Isaac can only hope.

"Hear me out," Stilinski says, not backing down. "What we're dealing with here is basically someone who lacks motive. No rhyme, no reason, right?"

"Meaning what?" Argent asks.

"Our enemy's not a killer," Stilinski says. "It's a *trickster*. The killing is just a by-product."

"If you're trying to say it won't kill us, I'm not feeling too confident about that," Derek says, arms crossed over his chest. He tilts his head towards Isaac as if he's evidence to support the claim.

"It won't. It wants irony. It – It wants to play a trick. It wants a joke. All we need to do... is come up with a new punch line," Stilinski says, and there's that glint in his eyes.

"Well, the sun is setting, Sheriff," Argent says. "What do you have in mind?"

"I pretend to go alone," the sheriff begins, sharing his idea. "I act like I believe it's the real Stiles, and I try to appeal to him. I let the nogitsune think it's tricked me, and that's when you four come in. We flip the script. We trick the trickster, and then you *contain* him."

It's not very funny. It's hardly ironic. It's certainly not a masterful punch line, but it's also the best plan they've got. It's the *only* plan they've got. They're still playing right into the nogitsune's hand, but at least they aren't willingly walking into a trap *completely* unprepared.

As the others fine tune the plan, trying to enhance it, Isaac sends a quick text to Scott: **Derek's loft. Can you meet us there?**

Scott doesn't reply, but Isaac doesn't have enough time to dwell on it. The sky is starting to burn with a bright orange glow. The sun is starting to set. They have to go.

They race against the earth's orbit, trying to outrun the setting sun, trying to get to the loft with enough time to let their flimsy joke play out before the oni descend.

Isaac isn't feeling very positive, but he tries not to let it show. He tries to find faith in their plan. He tries to share in Stilinski's blind optimism.

It's not going very well.

Instead, Isaac spends much of the car ride repeatedly checking his phone, hoping to see a text from Scott. He keeps turning up empty handed. It feels like a bad omen.

Isaac is incredibly nervous. He wants to save Stiles – of course, he does – but this isn't Stiles they're going to greet. This is the nogitsune. This is a dark spirit wearing Stiles' skin like a costume. Isaac isn't ready to witness it. He's not ready to see it in the flesh. He's not ready to see the nogitsune in action.

Isaac wants to save Stiles but... what if he's already gone? What if they can't save him?

When they arrive at Derek's loft, Stilinski takes the elevator while the other four take the stairs. It's great for Isaac's claustrophobia, and, hopefully, the misdirection will work.

Once they're up to the final set of stairs, the four of them slow their pace. They walk slowly and cautiously, trying to move quietly enough that Void Stiles won't be able to hear them.

They breach the top of the stairs, standing out in the hallway just beyond the loft's entrance. From there, they watch as Sheriff Stilinski enters the loft until he disappears into the room and out of view.

The building falls into silence. They stand completely still. They hold their breath.

It's Stiles' voice that breaks the quiet, "Hi, Dad."

De-Void

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 22

Word count: 5,047

Isaac and the others stand in total silence, listening intently for any sounds coming from the loft. Isaac and Derek pick up on the noise of handcuffs jangling, but Isaac isn't sure it would carry to human ears.

Still, Stiles' voice definitely does, "You want to handcuff me?"

"If my son is still here," Isaac can just barely hear the sheriff's footsteps hitting the floor. "If there's still a part of him standing here in front of me, then he'll put these on willingly and he'll come with me because he knows," Isaac hears the sheriff go still, "I'm here to protect him from himself and from others."

For a moment, there's nothing but silence. Nothing but silence accompanied by the quiet rustling of clothes and clanking of metal against metal. Isaac listens as closely as he can, even closes his eyes to help tune everything out, but he's getting nothing. There's nothing more.

Then, Sheriff Stilinski's voice breaks through. It's a cold whisper of, "You're not my son."

That's their cue. Isaac, Derek, Allison, and Argent make eye contact. With a curt nod, they fall into formation. The four of them burst into the loft. Void Stiles gives a humorless laugh, like he's feigning surprise. It sends shivers down Isaac's spine.

Time stands still for a moment. Isaac moves on autopilot, following the rest of the group into the loft, but he can't take his eyes off Stiles. All Isaac can see is him. As expected, Void Stiles is so much more terrifying in person. It looks like Stiles, but that's as far as the similarities go.

Stiles has a knack for taking up more than his share of space. Stiles fills the room with boisterous energy and enthusiasm, with flailing arms and rambling thoughts. But Void Stiles fills the room with darkness. It seems to radiate around him. His skin is ghostly pale and

there are dark circles under his eyes, but Isaac's focus is drawn inward. There's no light in Stiles' eyes, there's nothing more than an evil glint.

Isaac can't believe this is *their* Stiles. It can't be.

Isaac forces the shock away, blinking back to life. When he does, he sees Void Stiles pulling the wires of Allison's taser, easily deflecting her attempts at an attack. He yanks the taser out of her grip completely, flinging it across the room.

Isaac and Derek share a glance, a flurry of communication passes between them in less than a second. Then, they lunge together. Isaac and Derek leap towards Void Stiles, hoping to work together to overpower him. For a brief moment, Isaac thinks it's going to work, but then Void Stiles shoves Isaac back with a firm hand in the center of his chest. Isaac stumbles back one, two, three steps. Full energy focused on Derek, Void Stiles blocks his next punch with ease, twisting his arm behind his back and slamming him face first into the metal table.

Isaac growls. He regains his footing and charges at Void Stiles. Stiles is only human. He shouldn't be able to beat Isaac on strength alone. The thought is meant to bolster Isaac's confidence, meant to fuel him forward, but it has the opposite effect. At the last second, Isaac pulls his punch. It's a horrible mistake, but Isaac doesn't want to hurt *Stiles*. He can't help his instincts.

And so, Isaac is thrown against a pillar, sending him crashing to the floor.

Isaac struggles to get up, trying to shake off the blow. As he does, he hears a gun cock. Isaac goes stone still. He lifts his gaze, and, immediately, sees Argent holding a gun. One that's pointed right at Stiles.

Void Stiles turns.

Everyone is looking at Argent, awaiting for his next move. *There's no way Argent will go through with this, right?*

"Argent, listen to me," Sheriff Stilinski says, "don't do this."

Isaac slowly moves to his feet. Argent *can't* do this.

"Why not?" Argent asks. "I've done it before. Werewolves, berserkers.

I can easily add a nogitsune to the list.”

Stilinski pulls his own gun on Argent. Isaac can barely breathe through the tension, feels it choking him. His lungs are paralyzed in fear, same as the rest of him.

“You’re not going to shoot my son,” Stilinski says. There’s no doubt in Isaac’s mind that Stilinski can and will go through with this. If Argent so much as grazes the trigger, Stilinski will shoot. Maybe he won’t shoot to kill, but he *will* shoot.

This is Stiles they’re talking about. It’s not just *a* nogitsune. It’s *Stiles*. Maybe not in mind, but in body. Stiles is still in there somewhere. He has to be. There has to be a way to save him. There’s always a way.

“You said it yourself, Sheriff,” Argent says, turning his eyes onto Stiles. “That’s not your son.”

“Put it down,” Stilinski’s voice is low and dangerous. Then, louder this time, “Put it down!”

“Dad, he’s going to shoot me,” Void Stiles speaks. It’s Stiles’ voice. It’s his fear, it’s his emotion, but it’s not real. It’s a trick, and it’s working. “He’s going to kill me, Dad.”

The words draw Stilinski’s attention, pulling his eyes away from Argent who stays steady. He keeps his gun stable and his voice firm when he warns, “Don’t listen.”

“Put the gun down. Put it down,” Sheriff Stilinski orders. “Now! Do it! Put it down!”

“Do it. Pull the trigger. Come on,” Void Stiles goads, no trace of the earlier emotion. He’s back to cold, calculated indifference. It’s a manipulation, all of it.

“Listen to me, you put the gun down now!” Stilinski shouts. He’s becoming desperate, his face is turning red.

“Shoot me,” Void Stiles says, entirely calm. Then, without a breath, he starts yelling, “Shoot me! Shoot me!”

This is getting out of hand. Something horrible is about to happen.

Still frozen, Isaac can only watch the three of them. Stilinski is repeatedly yelling at Argent, the anger is bubbling up inside him,

spilling out across the room. Argent is still holding his gun at Stiles, but his face is twisted in confusion. He's conflicted, glancing back forth between Void Stiles and the sheriff. And Void Stiles... He's yelling too, but there's no feeling. There's nothing but smug power. He's using their emotions against them. He's amplifying them, he's pouring gasoline on a fire.

Isaac can feel it all around them. It's a trick. It's...

"Strife," Isaac whispers.

The sun is setting. Darkness is descending over the room. This was nothing but a distraction.

"Stop! Stop it! This is what he wants! This is exactly what he wants!" Allison shouts over the noise, quieting the others.

"Not exactly," Void Stiles says, appearing even more menacing in the dim light of the evening sky. "I was kind of hoping Scott would be here."

Isaac was sort of hoping the same thing. He must have texted Scott at least half an hour ago by now. Scott should be here. He needs to be here. They need him. Isaac needs him.

"But I'm glad you all have your guns out because you're not here to kill me," Void Stiles says. He turns to face the window just as four oni materialize out of the shadows. "You're here to protect me."

Void Stiles backs up, falling behind Argent and Stilinski. Once again, they're sticking their necks out for the nogitsune, but there's nothing else they can do. Argent might not have been willing to kill Void Stiles, but the oni will. They have to protect him.

And so, they form a circle around Void Stiles, barricading him from the oni's reach. Isaac falls into place beside Derek, shooting him a quick glance. Isaac can't read Derek's facial expression, can't quite discern the emotion there, but, still, he finds reassurance in the eye contact. He finds comfort in the brief moment of connection before the chaos is unleashed.

Isaac readies himself for the fight.

The oni swing their swords, slicing through the air. Then, they attack.

There's five of them against four oni, but it's still a close match. One

of the oni launches at Isaac, so he keeps his attention there. If Isaac can knock the oni's sword out of his hand, then he might stand a chance, but that means getting in close.

The oni comes at Isaac, sword swinging, but Isaac dodges. He maneuvers around the sharp blade, twisting his way out of its reach. Isaac manages to get around the oni, and uses it to his advantage. Before the oni can turn, Isaac attacks from behind. He grabs the neckline of his armor, and reels the oni in. He pulls one of the oni's arms, trying to twist it back, but the armor doesn't have enough give. Isaac can't quite pin him down.

The oni breaks out of Isaac's grip. He spins around to face Isaac, and, as he does, he cuts the sword into Isaac's side. The blade slices down Isaac's ribcage, ripping through his shirt and into his skin. Isaac winces, almost crying out at the sharp, stinging pain.

Isaac tries to keep fighting through the injury, but it slows him down considerably. It gives the oni the upper hand, and now Isaac is struggling to keep up. The oni has him backing away, almost running from the fight. The oni is closing in.

Then, out of nowhere, the oni vanish. They disappear in waves of black smoke, and the fight is over just as quickly as it began.

Isaac holds his hand over his bleeding side, surveying the others. Derek is similarly banged up; though, fortunately, it seems the two of them took the brunt of the damage, and the humans are unharmed.

Isaac casts his eyes across the room, realizing with a start that the oni aren't the only ones who took off.

Void Stiles is gone.

Before a word can be said, there's movement in the hallway. Stilinski and Argent pull their guns and Isaac readies his claws, but there's no need. It's Scott and Kira. They come to stop in the entryway of the loft, looking out over the room. Scott asks, "What happened?"

"They disappeared," Allison says, still breathing heavily from the exertion. "They literally just vanished."

Scott and Kira step further into the loft.

"And so did Stiles," the sheriff says.

“Is everyone okay?” Scott asks. It’s directed to the group as a whole, but his eyes seem to linger a little longer on Isaac. He ignores it.

“Just minor scrapes, we’ll be fine,” Derek says, easing some of Scott’s anxiety.

Still, Scott repeats, “What happened?”

“It was another trick,” Isaac says, cutting to the chase. “Stiles used us to protect himself from the oni, and then he disappeared.”

Isaac has no idea how Void Stiles escaped. Maybe he slipped out when no one was looking, or maybe the nogitsune’s powers are more extensive than they realized. Regardless, Stiles is gone. This was all a waste. Stiles slipped through their fingers once again.

“Did you learn anything?” Isaac asks Scott. If they found a solution, a cure, then it would all be worth it.

“No,” Scott says, sharing a glance with Kira. “We didn’t really learn much at all.”

Kira looks at Scott, then around at the group, and then down to the ground. She scuffs her foot along the floor, shaking out her hands at her sides, and then she begins.

“My mom is the one who summoned the nogitsune, but it was during World War II. She’s a kitsune, like me, but also not like me. I’m a thunder kitsune, but she’s a celestial kitsune. Anyway, she’s nine hundred years old. Apparently. This is all news to me too. And she, well, she summoned the nogitsune, and then she defeated it. By killing it,” Kira rambles. Her voice sounds nervous, and, honestly, she has reason to be. Isaac may be able to recognize that a parent’s actions aren’t a reflection of the child, but the others might not be as understanding.

“If she defeated it, then how is it here?” Allison asks, not angry, just confused. Given Allison’s own complicated family history, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that she’s able to appreciate the nuance of Kira’s situation. In fact, everyone here – except for maybe Stilinski, but Isaac doesn’t know enough about him to be sure – has experience with complicated families. Maybe Kira doesn’t need to be nervous at all.

“She buried it in the nemeton,” Kira says. She doesn’t have to say anything else. The meaning is clear. Their sacrifice gave power back to the nemeton, and, in turn, gave power to the nogitsune. It’s their

fault this is happening.

Admittedly, it's not a lot of information to work with. Isaac is still feeling just as hopeless as he was five minutes ago, but it's something. At least they know the nogitsune can be contained. It can be defeated.

They know Void Stiles can be killed, but that leaves the all important question still unanswered, still hanging in the balance.

Can Stiles be saved?

—

After debriefing, the group splits off, returning to their homes to get some rest before the day breaks and Beacon Hills wakes.

Isaac stays at the loft with Derek. They haven't gotten a chance to properly reconnect since Derek got out of jail, and Isaac isn't ready to go back to the McCall house. Not yet. There's something holding him back. Something telling him he needs to be here, with Derek.

So, Isaac stays.

Derek approaches Isaac. Wordless, he pulls Isaac's torn shirt out of the way, revealing the full extent of the scratch along his side. It's not bad. It stings, sure, but it isn't deep and it's already healing. Isaac bats Derek's hand out of the way.

"I'm fine," Isaac says, trying to sound more sincere and less annoyed. From Isaac's vantage point, the slice across Derek's shoulder looks way worse than Isaac's, but he doesn't mention it.

Derek frowns, even more so than his default expression, but gives in. Instead, he says, "Wait here. I'll be right back."

Isaac sits down at the loft table, watching curiously as Derek disappears up the spiral staircase. Isaac listens, but all he hears is nondescript rummaging. Isaac has no idea what Derek is up to, but he doesn't have to wait long to find out. When Derek returns, it's with a chess set in hand.

Derek joins Isaac at the metal table, setting the chessboard down between them. It's different from Stiles', made of plastic rather than wood, but it's pretty much the same.

"Help me remember where Stiles put the pieces?" Derek says. It's

barely a question, more like an order, but Isaac is happy to comply.

Isaac understands Derek's interest in the chessboard. Not only was it Derek's name on the king piece, but the board is also a clue. It might give them some insight into Void Stiles' next move, and, right now, they need any advantage they can get.

"Do you know how to play chess?" Derek asks as they get to work.

"No, I was never taught," Isaac says, simply. He places Jackson's piece, one of the ones that looks like a castle, in the far corner. Isaac adds, "But I know Stiles made you the king and me a pawn, so that's pretty telling of his feelings towards us, if you ask me."

Derek huffs out a laugh. It's a small thing. (One day Isaac is going to *really* make him laugh, he's determined.) Then, Derek says, "Stiles likes you more than he wants to admit. He certainly likes you more than he likes me."

"Is this a competition?" Isaac asks. "Are we vying for *Stiles'* affection?"

Derek laughs again. It's still small, but it's big enough to make him wince when his shoulder shakes. Despite the inflicted pain, Isaac counts it as a minor victory.

Just then, the loft door creaks open. Derek and Isaac both perk up, ready for anything, but it's just Peter. He strides into the room, looking at them with obvious judgment.

"*What* are you two doing?" Peter asks, glancing between the chessboard and the pair of them. "Is now really the time for father-son bonding?"

Isaac's pretty sure his heart just skipped not one, but two beats. He's caught off guard by the accusation. It hits too close to home. Isaac definitely doesn't see Derek as a replacement for his father, but he does consider him to be family. Derek knows this, but that doesn't mean Isaac wants it to be public knowledge. He definitely doesn't want *Peter* to have this over him.

Isaac feels exposed, torn open in the worst way. He can feel his face turning red in embarrassment, he can feel Derek and Peter's eyes on him. Isaac's certain if he were to look up, he would see some smug smirk on Peter's face. But Isaac doesn't look up, just keeps studying his chess piece with unwarranted intensity.

By some miracle, Peter doesn't follow up with another snide remark. Instead, he asks, "More importantly, why aren't you healing?"

Derek glances at the wound across his shoulder while Isaac looks down at the matching one settled on his side. It still hurts, but it's nothing like Derek's. Derek's is ghastly, spread open wide over his shoulder and down his back.

"It's from one of their swords. It'll heal," Derek says, clearly not in the mood to deal with Peter. It's a shared feeling.

"By playing chess?" Peter asks.

"Back in his room, Stiles had a board with my name on one of the pieces," Derek says, still impatient. "If this is a game to him, then I need to figure out the plays."

"Not so easy to do when it's a game without rules," Peter says, giving Derek a pointed look.

Peter, though Isaac is loath to admit it, might have a point. Derek is approaching this from a position of deduction and analysis, but this isn't a game of logic. This is the game of a trickster spirit.

"What does that mean?" Derek asks.

"You're dealing with the kind of spirit that's lived too long to play by human rules. It's a fox spirit that chose to become human. And, supposedly, that's something they can only do after about a hundred years," Peter says. "If a kitsune is an annoying pain in the ass, then a *nogitsune*, which is a dark kitsune, is a freaking disaster."

Derek looks properly subdued, and it causes a flare of frustration in Isaac. He should swallow it down, push it to the side, but he's been doing that all night. Void Stiles isn't here to turn his emotions back against him, so there's nothing stopping Isaac from saying, "So what? We're supposed to give up? You might have perfected the art of doing nothing, but we're trying to help Stiles. We're trying to save him."

Peter looks at Isaac. He looks surprised by the outburst, maybe a little annoyed, but not angry. Derek, on the other hand, almost looks impressed.

"I'm just suggesting you might be wasting your time," Peter says with a shrug. "After all, *chess* is Stiles' game."

Then, Peter turns and walks away, exiting the loft without ever revealing why he was there in the first place.

When the loft door swings closed, Derek stares at Isaac. There's a small smile on his face, something amused and warm and almost proud.

"What?" Isaac says, faking oblivious.

Derek shakes his head, still smiling. Isaac counts it as a major victory.

—

Isaac sleeps over at the loft that night. He tells himself it's just for convenience. He tells himself it doesn't really mean anything, but, even within his own mind, it's not convincing. As is often the case with the lies Isaac tells himself, they're flimsy and weak and would crumble under any scrutiny.

Fortunately, Isaac falls asleep before any interrogation of his sleeping arrangement comes to pass. The truth remains buried just a little longer.

When Isaac wakes the next morning, there's a crick in his neck from sleeping on the couch. Isaac used to love this couch, but his body has gotten used to the guest bed at the McCall house. The thought makes Isaac feel guilty and ungrateful. He almost feels angry.

He pushes it down.

Isaac gets up off the couch, intending to stretch his too long legs with a short lap around the loft. Isaac only makes it a few feet. He sees the chessboard and instantly stops in his tracks.

The image of Ethan and Aiden's names on the chessboard in Stiles' room flashes across Isaac's mind. The once small spark of anger flares up in Isaac again, but, this time, it's a forest fire. Isaac can't push it down. Isaac is consumed by it.

Despite everything they've done, the twins are still inching their way into the pack, getting closer and closer to Scott. The twins are getting closer and closer to taking away everything Isaac holds dear. First, it was Erica, then it was Boyd, but who will be next? Isaac doesn't want there to be a next. He won't let there be.

The twins will be next.

Isaac can't take the twins down on his own, but he does know someone with a disproportionate amount of weapons. Isaac knows someone with an arsenal of weapons at their fingertips, one that Isaac has access to. He has the alarm code.

Isaac doesn't register making the decision to leave the loft, but, in next to no time, he's scaling the Argent apartment and entering the code. The window pops open without a hitch. Isaac climbs inside Allison's bedroom where, luckily, she's nowhere to be seen. Isaac can hear the sound of the shower running, which gives him at least five minutes to gather his supplies.

Isaac spots the familiar duffel from the day before, and sets it on Allison's dresser. There are plenty of weapons already inside the bag, but they're all the non-lethal variety, which just won't do for Isaac's purposes. No, Isaac is aiming to kill. He needs something *deadly*.

Unfortunately, Allison chooses that moment to walk through her bedroom door. Well, Isaac doesn't necessarily need a weapon to kill the twins. He just needs to slow them down. He needs to weaken them. Then, his claws can do the killing. Like Derek's in Boyd's chest.

Allison gasps, hair still damp, but dressed for school. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"There's still a lot of weapons here," Isaac says, ignoring her question. "I thought your new code was about protecting."

"Most of them are non-lethal," Allison says, but Isaac doesn't buy it. Non-lethal is just a nice way to say torturing or hobbling. Non-lethal weapons are how they play with their prey before putting it out of its misery.

"This looks pretty lethal to me," Isaac says. He pulls out a dagger, one Isaac is fairly certain has been embedded in his own skin before. "But maybe you should keep them. There's still a few of us out there who aren't quite so non-lethal." Isaac pauses. His anger is simmering below the surface, ready to rear its ugly head at any moment. "Like the twins."

Allison takes a step closer to Isaac. "I thought we were going to give them a second chance."

"They don't deserve it," Isaac says. They don't. They haven't redeemed themselves. They never will.

“Things are different now. It doesn’t have to be like that anymore,” Allison says, coming to a stop next to Isaac.

Isaac scoffs. Of course Allison would say something like that. Isaac zips the duffel bag closed, and brushes past Allison. She calls out for Isaac to wait, but he’s already out the bedroom door. Before Allison knows what hit her, Isaac slams the door closed, barricading it with a desk.

Distantly, Isaac hears Allison yelling his name, but he doesn’t stop. Isaac swings the bag over his shoulder and makes for the school.

When Isaac arrives, he follows the scent of the twins towards the locker room. First, Isaac selects his weapon of choice, an electric dart gun – Isaac knows how much being electrocuted hurts. Then, he drops the duffel bag and holds the gun steady.

Isaac stands just out of sight, listening to the twins bicker. He peeks around the corner, and sees Ethan and Aiden fighting. That’s when Isaac makes his move, when Ethan grabs his own brother’s throat, when Isaac can take them both out at once.

Isaac keeps aim on one of the twins, then, just as Allison taught him, he pulls the trigger.

The dart hits Ethan in the middle of his back immediately sending a pulse of electricity through his body and into Aiden’s. The growls die in the twins’ throats as they collapse onto the ground with a resounding thunk.

Isaac breathes out in relief, tipping the weapon onto his shoulder.

“I guess this is the part where I say something witty,” Isaac says. He steps closer to the twins, watching them shake and convulse. Seeing them writhe in pain strokes something sick and twisted inside Isaac, something sinister and vengeful. Something that isn’t quite satiated yet. Isaac slams the butt of the gun into Ethan’s jaw. He peers over Aiden, prepares to do the same to him, and says, “I’m not witty.”

The anger is boiling inside Isaac once more. He’s looking down at the mostly unconscious bodies of the twins, and all Isaac can think of is everybody they’ve killed, everybody they’ve *taken* from Isaac.

Isaac doesn’t want them unconscious. He wants them dead.

Isaac runs into Coach’s office, looking for anything he can use to speed

the process along. Isaac rips through the drawers, and there, buried behind inconsequential school supplies, is a bottle of alcohol. There's a thin layer of dust coating the glass, but that won't stop Isaac.

Isaac opens the bottle, shoving a tissue down into the neck. Now, all Isaac needs is a spark to get it going.

"Come on, Coach, you gotta have a lighter," Isaac says, tearing Coach's office apart to find one. Isaac doesn't even notice the destruction. All Isaac cares about is getting a fire going. All he cares about is killing the twins. All he cares about is vengeance.

Nestled in one of the drawers, Isaac spots just the thing he needs. Isaac reaches across the desk to grab it, saying, "I'm gonna burn it down for Erica, for Boyd." Isaac picks up the bottle. It's not vengeance, it's justice. For everyone the twins killed, for everyone hurt by the alpha pack. "For everyone."

"I'm gonna burn it," Isaac says, setting fire to the tissue. Isaac watches as it immediately starts to disintegrate, repeats, "I'm gonna burn it."

Isaac steps out into the locker room, heading for the twins. He's so close. Just a few more feet and then the twins will be burnt to a crisp. Just a few more steps.

But then, just as quickly as the flame was lit, the tissue is cut clean through. It drifts down to the floor in a sputter of ashes, dousing Isaac's hopes of killing.

Isaac turns to his right. He finds Kira standing there, blade held out in front of her.

"Nice sword," Isaac smirks. He drops the bottle of alcohol to the ground, uncaring of the shards of glass or the splattering of the liquid. In a single breath, the object of Isaac's anger shifts. Kira might not have killed anyone, but she has stolen from Isaac. Isaac takes a step toward her, crunching the remaining body of the bottle under his foot.

Then, something slams into Isaac's back. The impact knocks Isaac to his knees, sending him off course. There's fire in Isaac's lungs now. He's going to get his anger out, one way or another. Nothing can stop him.

"Isaac," it's Allison's voice. Typical. She gets to have her villain storyline, she gets to stab Isaac with daggers, but all is forgiven when it's Allison. No one cares when it's Allison. It's always Allison.

Isaac stands. This time, he's not messing around. He lets his wolf form out to play.

Allison and Kira escape into Coach's office, but then Isaac hears movement behind him. He slowly turns around, snarling. It's the twins. They're like roaches. They keep crawling back even when no one wants them around.

Isaac doesn't think strategically. He doesn't think about the best way to use his speed to his advantage, he doesn't think about using the twins against each other, he doesn't think about anything. Isaac just launches.

The twins fight back and they fight back hard, but Isaac has something they don't. Motive. Isaac is fueled by anger and pain and sadness. Isaac is fueled by revenge.

Isaac gets slammed through the glass window of Coach's office door, but he doesn't even blink. He doesn't let it slow him down. He just keeps fighting. He swings his claws, he sinks his teeth in, he kicks his legs.

Isaac isn't pulling punches. Isaac is fighting to kill. He's fighting like his life depends on it, and maybe it does. Isaac fights to survive.

An arrow pierces Isaac's chest. He roars out, more in surprise and fury than pain. Isaac turns to see Allison standing before him, scrambling to reload her bow. Isaac doesn't give her the chance. He pulls the arrow out of his chest, tossing it aside like it's nothing because it is. Right now, to Isaac, it's nothing. Allison is nothing, she's no one.

Isaac comes at Allison, but she kicks her foot out. The blow lands just below Isaac's chest, along his ribcage where he's still recovering from the oni's sword. It knocks Isaac back, sending pain radiating throughout his body.

It slows Isaac down, but not for long. Isaac falls into step behind Aiden. They're stalking towards Allison and Kira, cornering them. Isaac breathes in every bad thing that's ever happened to him, he lets it blind him. He lets it take over.

He prepares to kill.

An echoing roar pierces through the locker room, shaking the ground beneath their feet. Then, nothing. Isaac's mind goes blank. He collapses.

Insatiable

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 23

Word count: 10,254

Warning: canon character death

Isaac watches in disgusted horror as Deaton pulls his hand from Ethan's mouth, bringing a small fly out with him. Deaton drops it, letting the fly circle down the drain. Meanwhile, Ethan continues to cough violently, hand help up to his chest.

There's black blood staining Isaac's lips and an arrow wound in his chest, but neither compare to what's about to happen.

"Isaac, you're next," Deaton says, turning on him.

Isaac's eyes flash golden in fear and distrust. "Please – no, wait, all right?"

Deaton ignores Isaac's weak protests, pulling Isaac under the spray of the locker room shower. Deaton doesn't hesitate before reaching his entire hand down Isaac's throat, saying, "Don't fight it."

During his time as a werewolf, Isaac has experienced many horrible, invasive procedures. This is the worst one by far. It's worse than Peter's claws in the back of his neck. It's worse than the ice bath. It's awful.

"Don't fight," Deaton repeats as if Isaac has any choice in the matter. He doesn't. It's instinct. His airway is being restricted, his body is screaming at him to fight it. He pulls at Deaton's wrist, trying to tug his hand out of his mouth. Isaac squirms.

It's horrific and intrusive. Isaac just wants it to stop. He wants it to go away. It's probably only a minute or two, but to Isaac it feels like hours. It's uncomfortable, making every second drag on longer and longer.

"Got it," Deaton says. Finally, he pulls his hand away. He drops the third and final fly into the drain.

Isaac quickly moves out of the shower's spray, out of Deaton's reach. Isaac uses his shirt to wipe the blood and water and spit from his face.

Isaac hacks and coughs, bracing his hand against the tiled wall. He rubs at his neck in an attempt to get the intrusive feeling to go away, the feeling that something is still lodged in his throat. It's no use. The throat is so sensitive, the feeling will probably linger for at least a few more hours.

"Are they okay now?" Allison asks, giving Isaac a worried glance.

"I hope so," Deaton says, shutting off the shower. "The part that's worrisome is that this was most likely just a distraction for what was happening to Stiles."

"There's really two of them now?" Kira asks, voice laced with fear. "How's that even possible?"

"And how did the other one just take Lydia?" Allison asks, shaking her head.

"We turned around and they were gone," Deaton says. "So was her car."

"So no one notices him just kidnapping her right out of the house?" Aiden asks, breaking the twins' silence. His voice sounds weak, but the anger there is palpable.

"Most of us were concentrated on the bizarre sight of a creature materializing from out of the floor," Deaton says, sounding annoyed at the implication of Aiden's words. (Isaac, as much as he hates it, understands where Aiden is coming from. He's channeling his fears and worries into blame and anger. It's not healthy, but it's understandable.)

"Hold on," Kira says, words half air. "How are you so sure which Stiles is which?"

Isaac hadn't even considered that possibility. Why the real Stiles would choose to run off with Lydia, Isaac doesn't know, but it could be part of a bigger trick. Stranger things have happened.

"That's what they're trying to figure out now," Deaton says, ominous as ever.

Silence falls over the group as anxiety settles in their stomachs.

There's so much at stake here, and so much that could go wrong. It's impossible not to be worried.

Uncharacteristically, Isaac is the one to break the silence. "I'm – uh – I'm going to call Derek."

For some semblance of privacy, Isaac steps out into the hallway. It's likely that Derek was also temporarily possessed, but Isaac has to know for certain. He has to know that Derek is okay. So, Isaac calls.

Derek answers after the third ring, "*Isaac?*"

"Derek," Isaac breathes in relief. "Um. Did you... Were you–"

"Yeah, it possessed me too. I almost killed Argent," Derek says. Isaac can't quite place the emotion in his voice, but, if he had to guess, Isaac would say it's closest to stress.

"But you're both okay?" Isaac asks. He needs to hear the words.

"We're okay," Derek says. Then, *"Do you know what's going on? Why did this happen?"*

"It was a distraction," Isaac says. "The others managed to free Stiles from the nogitsune's hold, but now there's two of them. There's two Stilesees."

It sounds ridiculous in every sense of the word, which is reflected in Derek's bewildered, "*What?*"

"I don't know exactly what happened 'cause I wasn't there, but, apparently, Scott and Lydia went into Stiles' mind and separated him from the nogitsune," Isaac says. He sighs, and adds, "And, now, there's two of them... and one of them took Lydia."

"Which one? The real Stiles or the nogitsune?" Derek asks.

"We don't know yet, but my money's on the nogitsune," Isaac says. This could be another trick, but it seems unlikely.

"Right," Derek says, sounding exhausted. *"But you're fine?"*

"As fine as I can be," Isaac says. "I may or may not have attacked the twins, but they're okay. So."

"So," Derek repeats. It almost sounds like he's smiling.

"I have to go, I'm still at the school, and I think Allison is waiting for me. I just – I wanted to check in," Isaac says. He hates how ramblingly and nervous he sounds.

"I'm glad you did. Keep me updated," Derek says.

Isaac agrees and, with a quiet goodbye, he and Derek hang up.

Isaac finds Allison standing in the doorway of the locker room. She's fiddling with her phone, pretending she wasn't listening to Isaac's call. It's courteous, but unnecessary.

Allison asks, "D'you want a ride home?"

It takes Isaac a moment too long to realize Allison is referring to the McCall household. Still, he accepts, saying, "Sure, thanks."

Allison and Isaac walk out to the parking lot in a semi-comfortable silence. Isaac should apologize for trying to kill her, but the words won't breach his lips. Isaac knows it wasn't really his fault, but it was still his body. He still feels like he's to blame.

As they get in Allison's car, the guilt is piling up inside him. Isaac is ready to burst when Allison asks, "Do you really think it was the nogitsune that took Lydia?"

Isaac pauses. He wasn't expecting that. Like an idiot, he says, "Isn't that what we're all thinking?"

Allison's face falls. "Yeah."

Isaac immediately recognizes his misstep. Lydia is Allison's best friend. Of course her disappearance is going to affect Allison. Of course she's going to be shaken up. Isaac really is an idiot. He should have chosen his words more wisely, he should have been more considerate.

"But we'll find her," Isaac says, in a rush. "We always do."

Allison doesn't look convinced. "Lydia and Stiles are usually the ones who find people."

Allison might have a point, but Isaac isn't giving up. He's determined to help Allison find a little hope. So, he says, "You and me, we'll go out tomorrow. I'll track her by scent, you'll use your hunter expertise. We *will* find her."

Allison doesn't smile, but her expression does lift. "Yeah, okay."

Allison drops Isaac off at the McCall house, but he can't bring himself to open the door. He just stands there on the front porch like a coward. Isaac knows Stiles is inside. He knows Stiles is likely his true self again. And Isaac is terrified.

It's only been a week since the incident at the hospital. With all that has happened, it feels like a lifetime ago, but it was only a week. The physical wounds might have healed, but the emotional strain is still there.

Isaac isn't sure if he's ready to see Stiles again. Isaac *wants* to see Stiles again. He really and truly does, but he's scared. Isaac knows they have to talk about it. Even if neither of them want to – Isaac certainly doesn't – they have to talk about it. Stiles nearly killed Isaac. It might not have been Stiles' fault, but it was still his doing.

They have to talk about it. And that's what Isaac is scared of. He's scared of how it's going to change things between himself and Stiles. Right now, Isaac and Stiles are friends. They're friends, but the relationship is a primarily surface level thing. Maybe they both know it goes deeper than that. Maybe they both know they care about each other, but they don't talk about it. They don't acknowledge it.

Isaac and Stiles function without talking, but, now, they don't have a choice. They have to talk about it. They have to acknowledge it.

And Isaac is scared. Not of the conversation, but of the change it will inevitably create.

The front door opens. Isaac gasps and jumps in surprise. It's Scott.

Scott stands in the doorway, looking at Isaac with a small, somewhat fond smile. "You okay?"

Isaac is holding his hand over his racing heart, breathing heavily. He glares at Scott, pulling himself together, "No thanks to you. How'd you even know I was out here?"

"Your heartbeat," Scott says with a shrug. Then, "And the smell of your anxiety. Are you sure you're okay?"

Isaac huffs. "I'm fine."

“You’re lying,” Scott says, though there’s no malice in his voice. Scott steps out onto the porch, closing the front door behind him. He looks at Isaac with those attentive brown eyes.

Isaac caves under the watchful gaze. “I – I haven’t seen Stiles since before the incident at the hospital.”

“I know,” Scott says with a nod. “And I get it, but you have to come inside eventually. You can’t stand out here all night.”

“Can’t I?” Isaac implores. He hears the whine in his own voice, but, fortunately, Scott ignores it.

Instead, Scott just laughs. “Come on, Stiles wants to see you.”

As nervous as Isaac is, it’s always been easy to follow Scott, so that’s what he does.

Scott leads Isaac upstairs to his bedroom. There, they find Stiles sitting at the end of the bed, fiddling with the buttons on his jacket. As soon as he hears them enter, Stiles looks up. He’s like a deer in headlights. It fills Isaac with a sense of pity that he doesn’t particularly like.

“Hey,” Isaac says, stepping into the room and hoping his voice sounds casual.

“I’m gonna give you guys a minute,” Scott says.

Isaac whips around to look at Scott, eyes widening and mouth falling open. Isaac silently pleads with Scott to stay, but he doesn’t acquiesce. Scott closes the door, and his footsteps fade down the hallway.

Isaac slowly turns to face Stiles. He looks just as put upon as Isaac feels, which, for some reason, helps assuage some of Isaac’s fear.

Isaac stands just on the brink of Scott’s room, watching Stiles. Stiles looks like himself, though so did the nogitsune. The nogitsune, however, turned Stiles’ eyes dark. He turned his expression evil. Now, Stiles just looks tired. The light in his eyes has dimmed, the mischief fading, but there’s no darkness. It’s just exhaustion. It’s just a side effect of being so thoroughly broken down.

The thought breaks Isaac’s heart just a little bit. Stiles usually has so much light and energy. He’s usually so alive. Now, he looks to be on the brink of death. It’s terrifying for one too many reasons.

Stiles is similarly sizing Isaac up. Isaac watches as Stiles trails his eyes over Isaac's right side, searching for any evidence of the damage he did. Isaac knows there's nothing there, but, still, the weight of Stiles' attention makes him feel self conscious. In his awkwardness, Isaac runs his hand over the right side of his neck. The movement brings Stiles out of his daze.

"Hey," Stiles says, gaze lifting to Isaac's eyes. Stiles sounds nervous, like he doesn't really know what to say. Isaac being speechless is expected, Stiles not so much.

Isaac has only ever witnessed Stiles at a loss for words once before, when Stiles was trying to tell his dad about the existence of the supernatural. It means he's scared. Isaac finds some comfort in the notion that Stiles is struggling just as much as he is, though he does hope Stiles isn't scared *of* him.

Isaac moves cautiously, coming to sit beside Stiles. He doesn't look at Stiles, it feels like too much. Instead, he looks at his lap, and asks, "So, you're, uh, you're you again?"

"Yeah," Stiles says. He doesn't sound very sure. It makes Isaac feel like an open wound.

Isaac falls into silence. He doesn't know what to say. He doesn't know how to do this. He knows they have to talk about it, but he doesn't want to. He doesn't want to, so he doesn't initiate anything.

Eventually, Stiles cracks, "I'm sorry."

Isaac looks over at him. Stiles is staring at the closed bedroom door, pointedly ignoring any attempts at eye contact. Isaac can hear Stiles' heart hammering away in his chest.

"It's not your fault," Isaac says, resisting the urge to say, *we don't have to talk about this*. They do, Isaac knows. He just wishes it wasn't so difficult.

"It was my hands that cut the wire," Stiles says, voice laden with guilt.

To a certain extent, Isaac can understand how Stiles is feeling. Isaac was only possessed for a few hours, but, still, he's blaming himself for what he almost did. Stiles wasn't a case of almost. Stiles did kill people. He did hurt Isaac.

Isaac can't fully imagine the scope of Stiles' guilt, but he can help to

ease it. Isaac doesn't feel angry towards Stiles. He doesn't fault him. So, Isaac just tries to help Stiles forgive himself. "It wasn't really you."

"Yeah, but I remember doing it," Stiles says. "I remember wanting to hurt someone. I remember wanting to *kill* someone."

Isaac's breath catches in his throat. He's blindsided by the information. Isaac assumed, despite the varying degrees of severity, his and Stiles' experience being possessed would be similar. For Isaac, the memories are fuzzy. He remembers going after the twins and fighting Allison and Kira, but the rest is a blur. Isaac assumed Stiles would have a similar story to tell, but, apparently, for Stiles, the memories are fresh.

"You do?" Isaac asks, his surprise evident in his tone.

Stiles nods. His eyes flick to the side for a brief moment, just barely bringing Isaac into his field of vision, before they dart back to the door. "I remember everything... I almost killed you, Isaac. And I liked it."

Isaac shakes his head. "But that wasn't real. That wasn't you."

"It felt real," Stiles says. There's emotion in his voice, words sounding wet, "The consequences were real... I electrocuted you. You almost died. Why aren't you mad?"

Isaac blinks. "Because I know it's not your fault. I know if you had control, you would never do that."

"How?" Stiles asks, finally looking at Isaac. His eyes shine with unshed tears. He repeats, voice genuine, "How do you know?"

Isaac sighs. Of course Stiles is going to make Isaac be the one to say it. "Because we're friends."

"Barely," Stiles says, unimpressed by the explanation. He pauses, then admits, "If the positions were reversed, I don't know if I would be able to forgive you."

Stiles' heartbeat doesn't rise or fall or change. He's being honest, he really doesn't know. Isaac isn't surprised, and, truthfully, he doesn't mind. Still, he does have to fight back the urge to roll his eyes.

Instead, Isaac just shrugs. "Well, it's a good thing the positions aren't flipped."

Stiles' eyes widen, expression twisting into one of shocked confusion. It's an impressive show of his facial range. "How can you be so casual about this? What about this aren't you getting? I almost killed you and I liked it, *and* I wouldn't forgive you if you did the same."

"Stiles, don't *you* get it? I don't care," Isaac says, imbuing his voice with as much sincerity as he can muster.

"You should care," Stiles says. He sounds almost desperate, like he wants Isaac to hate him.

"Well, too bad. I don't. I – okay, listen," Isaac says, finally giving in. He can be vulnerable for a moment if it means getting this through Stiles' thick skull. Isaac takes a breath. Then, "I've never really had friends before, or even anybody that cared about me, honestly. I mean, other than Cam, I – anyway. The few people I have now – you, Scott, Derek, Allison – I can't afford to lose you. I refuse to let it happen. So, maybe you tried to kill me, but... I don't care. I know it wasn't actually you. I know you're sorry, I can literally smell it, so it doesn't matter. I value our friendship too much to let this get in the way of that. And we *are* friends, Stiles, okay? We've saved each other's lives one too many times to just be reluctant acquaintances. I care about you and I know you care about me too, even if you don't want to admit it."

For a moment, Stiles looks at Isaac like he's sprouted wings, but then he sighs, "All right, fine. Maybe I'm your *reluctant* friend."

Isaac smiles, "And you care about me?"

"You're... growing on me," Stiles says, sounding hesitant.

"Come on, I was just vulnerable with you. It's your turn," Isaac says, mostly teasing.

"Fine, I like... I – you're good company. I know it's a shock to us both, but, apparently, you can actually be a good friend when you're not trying to kill Lydia," Stiles says with sincerity in his voice. "You're not awful and you can be funny, sometimes. And you saved my dad's life. So."

"So," Isaac repeats, faintly smiling.

It's not a question, but Stiles responds like it is, "So, I will accept that you don't hate me. Even though I think you're a moron and you definitely should."

“Good enough,” Isaac says, knowing it’s the best he’s going to get right now. Stiles has been through a lot, and they’re still not quite out of the woods yet. It’s going to take some time for Stiles to come to terms with everything that has happened, and Isaac can respect that. He’ll be patient, and he’ll help wherever he can.

For now, Isaac says, “I really am glad you’re okay.”

“Yeah?” Stiles says, some of his usual over the top arrogance sliding into his voice.

“It was tiring being the only funny one around here,” Isaac says, keeping things surface level. Not because he has to, not because he and Stiles can’t talk about their feelings, but because he wants to. It’s progress.

“You think I’m funny?” Stiles asks, grinning.

“I take it back,” Isaac says quickly. “You’re the bane of my existence.”

“Nope, it’s too late. You think I’m funny and you care about me. Are you in love with me?” Stiles asks, wiggling his eyebrows.

“You repulse me,” Isaac says, but he’s smiling and Stiles is laughing. They’re going to be just fine. Even if everything goes to shit again, they will be okay.

A moment later, there’s a soft knock on the door. It creaks open, revealing Scott standing in the doorway. Isaac detects faint notes of surprise in Scott’s voice. “I heard laughter. Does that mean we’re all good?”

Isaac and Stiles share a moment of eye contact. As horrible as getting electrocuted was, Isaac can’t help but think maybe it will have some pay off. Maybe it will bring Isaac and Stiles closer. Maybe change isn’t always a bad thing.

“Yeah, all good,” Stiles says, still smiling, though his eyes start to dim once more. It’s like Scott’s entrance pulls Stiles back to reality. Isaac doesn’t want to see it, so he turns his attention over to Scott. There’s something sad about his expression. It makes Isaac frown.

“We, uh, we kind of have to talk about Lydia,” Scott says, which explains the sadness.

Stiles averts both of their eyes, looking down at his shoes.

Isaac speaks up, hoping a proactive plan will instill some optimism. "Allison and I are going to try to find Lydia by scent tomorrow."

"That's a good idea," Scott says, though it sounds forced. "There's a girl at Eichen House, Meredith, who we think can help us. Stiles' dad is going there now."

Isaac nods, but doesn't say anything. He should ask who the girl is and how she can help, but he doesn't. Rather, Isaac says nothing and quiet falls over the three of them.

Eventually, Stiles looks up. "We have to find her, Scott. I mean, it's Lydia. We can't do this without her."

"We will," Scott says, nodding. "We're doing everything we can."

"It doesn't feel like enough," Stiles says. There's exhaustion weighing down his words, and the dark circles under his eyes look even more pronounced than before.

"We should try to rest," Scott says, echoing Isaac's concerns for Stiles. "It's the best thing we can do right now."

Stiles doesn't look particularly convinced, but his obvious fatigue is a powerful source. It's enough that he nods. He falls back onto Scott's bed, staring up at the ceiling.

Isaac stands, making to leave the room. "Good night."

"G'night, Isaac," Stiles says, fighting back a yawn.

Isaac glances at Scott, who holds up a finger for him to wait. Isaac does. Scott says, "Hey, Stiles, I'll be right back."

Stiles hums in lieu of a proper response, tiredness quickly taking over. Isaac finds it worrisome, but he doesn't put it to words.

Scott gestures for Isaac to follow him, so Isaac does. Scott and Isaac walk down the hallway into the guest bedroom where Scott gently closes the door behind them.

Once the door is closed, Scott pitches his voice low, "Everything go okay?"

"Yeah," Isaac says. "Not sure he fully believes he isn't to blame, but there's only so much I can say."

Scott nods in understanding. Then, with a small smile, “You made him laugh. No one else has done that.”

Isaac’s eyebrows raise in surprise. “Oh.”

“Oh,” Scott repeats. It sounds like he’s poking fun at Isaac, but it’s never ill-natured, not with Scott.

“He’s going to fall asleep in your bed *with his shoes on* if you stay here,” Isaac says, deflecting.

Scott cracks a smile. “Okay, okay, I’m going.”

—

The next day, Allison arrives at the McCall house in the early afternoon. She and Stiles have a brief reunion, though it’s not much. Stiles has gone quiet today, seeming to shut down. It’s hard to watch.

Allison and Isaac, struggling to see Stiles like this, don’t stay long. They head out to Allison’s car, ready to search for Lydia. Isaac is determined to succeed.

“Here,” Allison says, handing over the shirt of Lydia’s that she brought.

Isaac holds it close to his nose, drinking in the scent of the fabric. Underneath the thin layer of floral perfume, Isaac catches Lydia’s true scent. He holds onto it for a moment, committing the scent to memory.

“Got it,” Isaac says.

Allison nods. She starts the car and is about to pull out of the driveway when Scott runs outside. He holds his hands up, signaling for them to wait. Isaac flashes Allison a nervous look, one that’s mirrored in her own expression.

Allison puts the car back in park and removes the keys from the ignition. Isaac steps out of the car, standing in the open doorway.

Before Isaac or Allison can say anything, Scott says, “They found Lydia’s car. It’s being taken to the impound lot.”

It’s not horrible news, but it’s certainly not excellent either. It’s mediocre at best.

“Lydia might have left us a clue,” Allison says, starting to sound hopeful.

Scott nods, “I – I don’t want to leave Stiles. I was thinking you guys could go?”

Allison and Isaac share a look, instantly getting on the same page. The decision is obvious. Tracking Lydia by scent is a tricky business, there’s no guaranteed success, especially when she’s been taken by the nogitsune. In the past, they were only ever able to find the nogitsune when it wanted them to. The car, however, is guaranteed. They know exactly where it is, and, hopefully, it will provide them with some much needed information.

So, Allison and Isaac change tactics. They get back in her car, but, this time, they have a clear direction.

When they arrive at the impound lot, there’s only one car there. From a distance, it looks like Lydia’s, but they’ll have to get closer to be certain.

Isaac doesn’t want to say it was too easy – that’s just testing fate – but it does feel that way. At first, it seemed as if the nogitsune lacked motive. Like all it wanted was chaos and strife, not caring how that was achieved. Now, things feel different. Isaac doesn’t know which is worse: randomized or premeditated destruction.

With randomized destruction, there’s no predicting where the next strike will occur. They can’t prepare for it. There are no clues to unravel, no mystery to unsolve. It’s just chaos. All they can do is try to weather the storm.

Premeditated destruction, however, has a plan. There’s a rhyme and reason. If they can figure out what that is, they might be able to prevent the strike before it happens. Still, even if they do manage to anticipate the premeditated destruction, it’s often the more fatal of the two. The stakes are higher, the attack is more focused. There’s a motive to premeditated strikes, and that makes them more dangerous. More deadly.

Before they get out of the car, Isaac says, “We should be careful. This could be another trap.”

Allison nods, and, together, they step out into the parking lot. The pair approaches the fence, disregarding the no trespassing sign. There’s a length of chain locking the gate, but it’s hardly a hindrance. Isaac taps

into his werewolf strength, using it to rip the chain apart, pulling until the metal snaps. The chain slides free. Isaac drops it to the ground and opens the gate.

“That’s it,” Allison says, entering the lot. “That’s Lydia’s car.”

As Isaac moves through the fence, he’s immediately greeted by the powerful scent. It’s so potent he doesn’t even have to focus his powers to latch onto it, it’s just there. He informs Allison, “The scent’s strong with emotion.”

“Fear?” Allison asks, rounding the car.

“No, anger,” Isaac says.

“Sounds like Lydia,” Allison says. She’s right. It’s such typical behavior of Lydia. She gets kidnapped, but she’s not scared for her life. Maybe she should be, but she’s not. She’s just angry. She’s just annoyed at the inconvenience.

Isaac wonders if the nogitsune knew Lydia would react in this way. If it did, that might be a clue. If the nogitsune didn’t take Lydia with the intention of feeding off her fear, then it must have been something else. It certainly wasn’t a random choice, not when everything the nogitsune’s done thus far has been carefully calculated. Maybe, if they can figure out the reason, then they can uncover the nogitsune’s plan.

“Let’s see what else we can find,” Allison says, ducking to search along the side of the car.

Isaac follows suit, leaning down to look under the car. He’s not sure what he’s looking for, but there has to be something here. The car was left here for a reason. Even if it’s just another set up, they might be able to gain some information.

Finding nothing, Isaac stands. He looks over the top of the car at Allison. She must feel Isaac’s gaze on her because she abruptly stops searching. She goes still, eyes meeting Isaac’s. Her eyes are deep brown and underneath the current overtone of anxiety is their typical kindness, not dissimilar to Scott’s.

In that moment, looking in Allison’s eyes, his guilt starts to resurface. It’s been lingering at the back of Isaac’s mind since yesterday, always there but not enough to distract him. Now, it comes to the forefront. Now, it’s a distraction.

Isaac looks at Allison, and all he can think about is almost hurting her. Or maybe he actually did. Isaac doesn't know for certain. The memories are still too foggy. As hard as he tries to remember, he keeps coming up blank. The memories are lost, and Isaac hates it. He needs to know what happened. He needs to know what he did.

"Um, I wanted to ask you about yesterday," Isaac says, staring down at the ground. "Like, uh, what I did... to you."

"You still don't remember?" Allison asks.

Isaac looks up. "No."

Allison opens the driver's side door, getting into Lydia's car. Isaac follows her lead.

"You showed up in my room in the morning," Allison says, moving around in her seat, almost like she's uncomfortable. It's making Isaac nervous. "You, um, you took some weapons and you..." She pauses, like she really doesn't want to say it, then, "You barricaded me in my room."

Isaac's heart drops. It's cruel. It's horrible. It's the worst thing Isaac could have been forced to do. His heart is in his stomach. It's a heavy, sudden lurch. It's too much. "I – I think I'm going to be sick."

"Isaac. Isaac, no, it's fine," Allison says in a rush. She reaches her hand out, but then aborts the movement, pulling it back.

Isaac shakes his head. It's the opposite of fine. Isaac knows what it's like to be trapped. Isaac knows that feeling all too well. That particular brand of torture was always his dad's favorite. That helpless, powerless feeling is so familiar. It's an old friend of Isaac's. Even now, Isaac can feel it starting to creep up his spine.

"I'm so sorry," Isaac says. The guilt is going to eat him alive. It's going to destroy him. He feels so horrible. He can't stomach this. This is his limit. This is too much.

"Isaac," Allison says, voice gentle. Isaac has to force himself to look at her. She places her hand on Isaac's shoulder, making careful eye contact. "It's okay. It wasn't you, you know that."

Isaac does know that. It's ironic, really. Isaac spent the previous night trying to convince Stiles none of what he did was his fault. Now, here Isaac is, in the same position as Stiles, directly contradicting his own

words and blaming himself.

"It was the nogitsune," Allison says calmly. "It's just another layer to his sick joke. Don't let it get to you. Don't give him what he wants."

Isaac nods. Allison always knows exactly what to say. She doesn't give him pity. She doesn't belittle his feelings. She responds with level headed logic. She tells him exactly what he needs to hear.

If Isaac lets this upset him, if he lets it distract him, then the nogitsune wins. *Then his dad wins.* Isaac can't let that happen. He has to stay above it all.

"Sorry," Isaac repeats one last time, just to get it out of his system. He doesn't know if he's apologizing for the actions of his possessed self or the way he's reacting now. Probably both.

"Don't be," Allison says. "We all have our demons."

"We just can't let them win," Isaac says, like he's finishing her thought.

"Yeah," Allison says, "and you can't face them alone."

Allison gives him a small, reassuring smile. It's warm and beautiful. Isaac tries to send one back, though it feels foreign on his face.

Isaac watches as Allison looks away, eyes surveying the car. Her smile slowly starts to drop, morphing into an expression of contemplation. Allison stares at the window for a moment. Then, she presses up, leaning closer to it. She breathes hot air onto the glass, revealing the words: *don't find me.*

It's Lydia's handwriting. It's a message. It's not a good one.

—

Isaac goes back to the McCall house in hopes of finding Scott and Stiles. He aims to tell them about the warning he and Allison found as well as offer his assistance in whatever the next endeavor is. However, when Isaac steps inside, it's not Scott or Stiles that he finds. It's Agent McCall.

He's standing in the kitchen, leaning on the counter, though he straightens when Isaac enters. Isaac freezes.

"Isaac," Agent McCall says. He sounds surprised, but there's still a

sternness to his voice. “Why don’t you take a seat?”

“Oh, uh—” Isaac flounders, failing to muster up an adequate excuse.

“Sit down,” Agent McCall says. There’s nothing mean about his voice, but it’s firm enough that Isaac is forced to listen. Despite himself, Isaac is too scared to disobey.

Isaac sits down in one of the kitchen chairs, watching Agent McCall closely. Isaac doesn’t say anything, just waits for him to break.

“You know, school attendance is important,” Agent McCall says. It’s not what Isaac was expecting. He was expecting to be lectured, but not about something as mundane as high school.

“I do well in school,” Isaac says quickly, operating on instinct. He can almost feel the ghost of his father breathing down his neck, instilling the importance of grades.

Agent McCall’s eyebrows furrow, painting his expression with confusion. Isaac realizes Agent McCall might be one of the only people left in Beacon Hills who *doesn’t* know about his dad’s abuse. Isaac has no interest in amending that. In fact, he’s grateful for it. This conversation is awkward enough as it is.

“That’s, uh, that’s not really what I meant,” Agent McCall says, though he sounds unsure. “It prepares you for the responsibility of the adult world.”

Isaac is fairly certain he has more responsibility resting on his shoulders than the majority of the adult population. Still, Isaac just nods.

Then, the door bursts open and Scott runs into the room. He comes to an all but screeching halt before his dad. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Agent McCall says.

Isaac’s eyes dart between Scott and his dad. Isaac doesn’t think he’ll ever get used to the casual, sometimes hostile, way Scott speaks to his father, going toe to toe with him. Even now, with his dad six feet under, Isaac is still terrified. He’s still trapped in the metaphorical freezer. He’s still affected by it every day.

Isaac lowers his gaze, hoping that avoiding eye contact will keep him out of the line of fire.

Stiles' voice abruptly cuts in, "Free period! We're doing group study."

Isaac looks up. He was so hyper focused on the tension between Scott and his father that he didn't even notice Stiles come in. He's accompanied by a girl, too. Isaac has never met her, doesn't recognize her at all, but, based on her apparel, Isaac can only assume that this is Meredith. The girl from Eichen House.

"Who's she?" Agent McCall asks, tilting his chin towards the girl.

Stiles momentarily hesitates before awkwardly putting his arm around Meredith. "She's my girlfriend."

"You're not my type," Meredith says, pulling away from Stiles. Isaac smothers his amusement.

"Well, obviously, we have a lot to talk about," Stiles says, not taking his eyes off of Scott's dad. "We should maybe take this upstairs."

"He's my type," Meredith says, voice turning almost suggestive. She's looking right at Isaac.

Isaac's mouth parts open as an unexplainable feeling of anxiety floods his system. He glances over at Scoot, feeling nervous and fidgety and searching for guidance. Scott is already looking at him, wearing the same stunned expression as Isaac.

"Okay. Isaac can come too," Stiles says, awkwardly scratching at his neck.

"Oh, uh..." Isaac exhales, not knowing what to say. He wants to escape the strain between Scott and his dad, but he can't ignore the uncomfortable feeling swelling inside him.

Stiles and Meredith make to leave. Isaac spares one last glance towards Scott. He tips his head, gesturing for Isaac to head out. Isaac gives a small nod, and, despite his discomfort, follows Stiles and Meredith up the stairs and into Scott's bedroom.

At the brink of the room, Isaac and Stiles come to a pause while Meredith takes a seat on the edge of Scott's bed. The two of them share in a moment of eye contact. Stiles is looking at Isaac like he knows something, something Isaac doesn't. It's unsettling, to say the least.

"What?" Isaac mouths, feeling almost annoyed by the scrutiny.

Stiles shakes his head, giving Isaac nothing to work with. Instead, Stiles steps into Scott's bedroom. The moment drops and whatever Stiles was thinking falls away, leaving Isaac in the dark. Isaac sighs and enters the room.

"Okay, Meredith, what do you know about Lydia?" Stiles asks, approaching the girl.

Isaac and Stiles stand over Meredith, watching her closely. Isaac crosses his arms over his chest, practically holding his breath. Meredith looks at them, expression almost completely blank. Then, a lightbulb goes off. "Lydia? You mean the red-haired girl?"

"Yes! Yes! Good. Progress," Stiles says, emphatic. "Now, all you got to do is tell us where she is."

"Okay," Meredith says simply. Then, "If she tells me."

Isaac leans forward, mouth falling into an *oh* shape. "If she tells you?" He clarifies, glancing quickly at Stiles, then back to Meredith. "Uh – Can you ask her?"

"I already did," Meredith says, smiling like she's proud of herself.

"Perfect, perfect. What did she say?" Stiles asks. This is like pulling teeth. They have to pry each answer out of Meredith. It's almost painful.

"She said..." Meredith's smile drops, "she doesn't want to be found."

Stiles taps his fists together, body slumping slightly. "That's good too."

"Okay," Isaac breathes, almost inaudible.

Isaac remembers the message on the car window. *Don't find me*. Isaac wants to tell Stiles about the warning, but knows he won't take it well. Even if all the signs are suggesting they should, Stiles won't stop looking. He blames himself for Lydia's disappearance, and he won't stop until he finds her. Isaac knows as much. So, he can't tell Stiles that they should heed the warnings. He can't even imply it.

Stiles smacks his lips together, drawing Isaac's attention. Stiles points his thumb in the direction of Scott's bathroom, signaling for Isaac to have a sidebar with him.

Isaac nods.

“Give us a minute, Meredith,” Stiles says, then walks towards the bathroom.

Isaac follows him. They leave the bathroom door open, keeping Meredith in their line of sight. Isaac leans against the sink, watching her. He can’t shake the feeling that Meredith knows something. She can help them, they just haven’t asked the right question yet.

“She knows something,” Isaac whispers. “Maybe we can *make* her tell us.”

“Isaac,” Stiles hisses, sounding scandalized.

“I’m just saying...” Isaac mumbles. If they’re going to get answers out of Meredith before nightfall, they’re going to have to be creative.

“Isaac, we’re not going to *torture* her,” Stiles whispers. Isaac thinks the use of the word ‘torture’ is a bit dramatic, even for Stiles.

“I meant *scare* her,” Isaac whispers back, defending himself.

“We’re not going to psychologically torture her either,” Stiles says, gesticulating wildly. He says it like Isaac is completely out of line. Isaac thinks that’s a bit unfair, all things considered.

“Fine,” Isaac huffs. “Okay, how about this? You said she hears things, right?”

Isaac looks at Stiles out of the corner of his eye, just barely catching his small nod of assent and breath of, “Yeah.”

“Doesn’t that mean she’s like Lydia?” Isaac asks, looking from Stiles over to Meredith. “A banshee?”

Isaac and Stiles focus their attention onto Meredith. She’s sitting on the bed, appearing perfectly still; however, upon further inspection, Isaac sees the twitching of her neck and mouth. It’s the slightest movement, but it’s there.

Stiles turns to Isaac. “Okay, so, we just have to try to trigger a banshee premonition?”

Stiles says it like it’s a simple solution, but they both know it isn’t. Lydia has rarely ever been able to predict something on command. There’s no evidence indicating that Meredith’s abilities will be any different, but they have to try.

Isaac and Stiles step back into the bedroom. Stiles takes up his spot directly in front of Meredith, though, this time, he crouches down to her level. Isaac drags Scott's desk chair over, settling in for however long this might take. He places his hands on the seat, leaning his weight forward.

"Okay, Meredith, we're going to try something, all right?" Stiles asks.

Meredith gives a jolted nod. "Okay."

"Okay, just try to listen to the sounds around you," Stiles says, gesturing with his hands. "On what you're hearing. Just focus on the silence."

"*Listen* to the silence," Isaac adds, trying to help guide Meredith in the right direction. 'Listen' just seems like the better word choice. It emphasizes the importance of hearing *something*, rather than focusing on the nothingness.

"*Focusing* on the silence," Stiles says, purposely correcting Isaac like the insufferable know-it-all that he is.

Isaac glances over at Stiles, feeling a little annoyed. Being a nuisance, Isaac reiterates, "Listening... to the—"

"Okay, will you just let me handle this, Isaac? Please?" Stiles cuts Isaac off. "I just – I have more experience with banshees."

Isaac tilts his head, mumbling, "Yeah, and mental patients."

Stiles looks at Isaac, expression turning to one of offended exasperation. Isaac looks back at him, wondering if the retort pushed too far. Before Isaac can start to dwell on it, Meredith asks, "Isn't anyone going to get that?"

"Get what?" Stiles asks, voice echoing Isaac's own confusion.

"The phone," Meredith says, like it's obvious. Her hand is laid out, like she's pointing towards Stiles.

"What phone?" Stiles asks obtusely.

Isaac quickly realizes that Meredith must be hearing something they can't. Isaac taps Stiles' shoulder as if to say, *come on*. Then, he insists, "The phone."

Stiles looks down, then starts to catch on. "Oh," he says, "the phone."

Isaac nods, seeing that Meredith is on the same page as them. He mouths, “*Right*.”

“My phone, yes,” Stiles says, rummaging around in his jacket pocket to retrieve it. Isaac gives a weak chuckle, trying to maintain the levity and keep up the act.

“Hello?” Stiles asks, pretending to answer the phone. He stays quiet for a second, during which Isaac sends Meredith a small smile. Stiles adds, “Yes, she’s – she is actually. She’s sitting right here.” Stiles points at Meredith, handing her the phone. “It’s for you.”

Meredith takes the offered phone, holding it up to her ear. Stiles and Isaac lean in, giving Meredith their undivided attention. Isaac holds his breath.

It’s only a few seconds, definitely less than a minute, before Meredith is holding the phone out to Stiles again. She relays the message, “They say, ‘coup de foudre.’”

Completely clueless, Isaac slumps, falling back in his chair.

“Coup de what?” Stiles mumbles. He looks at Isaac, “What is that, Spanish?”

“Uh...” Isaac intones. Isaac’s a third year French student. He knows full well what language it is, he even knows what the phrase means, but it doesn’t make any sense. It’s nothing more than an idiom. A riddle, maybe.

“French,” a familiar voice interjects, full of certainty. Scott is standing in the doorway, eyes squinting as the pieces start to come together, “It’s French.”

“What does it mean?” Stiles asks.

“It means I know where Lydia is,” Scott says in a rush of air.

“Where?” Isaac asks, already starting to stand.

“Oak Creek,” Scott says. “The old World War II internment camp.”

After that, the pace picks up pretty quickly. Scott, Stiles, and Isaac race to inform the others of the location and get to Oak Creek as fast as possible. Night is falling now, which means that the oni will be coming for the nogitsune, and, in turn, Lydia. They have to hurry.

They pile into Stiles' Jeep: Stiles driving, Scott in the passenger seat, and Isaac in the back. Then, they head on their way, getting onto the highway in record time. There, Stiles floors it, pushing the Jeep to its limit and disregarding the speed limit.

This is the moment of truth. Or, at least, it's supposed to be. They're going into this like it's the final fight, but they're completely unprepared. They still don't know whether they should have listened to Lydia's warnings to stay away. They still don't know how to kill the nogitsune. They still don't know if they *can* kill it without hurting the real Stiles. Sure, there might be two of them now, but the nogitsune is still wearing Stiles' face. And this Stiles, the real Stiles, here in the Jeep with them, looks horrible. They still don't even know if Stiles is going to be okay.

There's so much they don't know. They barely know anything at all.

Isaac looks between Scott and Stiles. He can see the worry running through Scott's mind. He seems despondent and distracted. Stiles must notice it too because he asks, "Hey, you okay?"

"Yeah," Scott says, keeping his voice light despite the obvious anxiety radiating off of him. (Scott is a terrible liar and he's even worse at hiding his emotions.) "Yeah, you don't have to worry about me."

"All right, I'm gonna say it," Isaac says, tired of stewing in his own fears. "You look like you're dying. You're pale, you're thin, and you look like you're getting worse. And we're all sitting here thinking it." Isaac's voice is inflected with indifference, but, under the surface, his nerves are taking over. "When we find the other you, is he going to look like he's getting better?"

They only just got Stiles back. They can't lose him. Isaac meant it when he told Stiles he refused to lose any of his friends. He won't allow it.

"What happens if he gets hurt?" Scott asks, directing the question at Stiles.

"What do you mean, like if he dies, then do I die?" Stiles says, keeping his eyes on the road. He shakes his head, "I don't care. Just so long as no one else dies because of me."

Stiles glances in the rearview mirror, making quick eye contact with Isaac. Isaac feels emotion stirring up inside. He doesn't like the way Stiles is talking. Stiles still doesn't get it. None of them blame him. It's

not his fault. He doesn't deserve to be punished. He's suffered enough.

"I remember everything I did, Scott," Stiles confesses. Isaac assumed Scott would have already been privy to the information, but, based on the uptick in his heart, it seems to come as a surprise. Stiles continues, "I remember pushing that sword into you. I remember twisting it."

"It wasn't you," Scott says genuinely.

"Yeah, but I remember it," Stiles counters. "You guys gotta promise me. You can't let anyone else get hurt 'cause of me."

Scott looks back at Isaac. They're both thinking the same thing: it's not a promise they can make. Isaac would fall on his own sword to save Stiles. And Isaac knows Scott would do the same.

Still, Scott gives a small nod and the conversation fades.

Shortly after, they pull into a long drive. The Jeep's headlights illuminate the way, revealing the figures of Allison and Kira, outlined by a dramatic black gate. Along the top of the gate, in bold metal letters, reads, *Oak Creek*.

Stiles shuts the Jeep off and the three of them climb out. Isaac marches over to the gate, joining Allison and Kira. The group forms a circle, gathering together to prepare for the fight of their lives.

Scott takes a deep breath, exhales, and then, "We've done this before, guys. A couple of weeks ago we were standing around just like this, and we saved Malia, remember?" Scott takes care to look at each one of them, instilling them with whatever hope and motivation he can muster. "That was a total stranger. This is Lydia."

Full of determination, Allison says, "I'm here to save my best friend."

"I'm here to save mine," Scott says, looking over at Stiles.

This is all so sentimental and cheesy. It's the kind of openness Isaac still isn't accustomed to.

"I just didn't feel like doing any homework," Isaac says, trying to diffuse the tension. He smirks over at Scott, who flashes him a fleeting smile. Isaac turns towards the gate, entering *Oak Creek*.

The group splits. Scott and Stiles branch off into one of the tunnels to try to find Lydia. Meanwhile, Isaac, Allison, and Kira carry on into the

main entrance. There, as expected, Noshiko and two of her oni lie in wait for them.

“Kira, turn around and go home,” Noshiko says. It’s a thinly veiled threat. “Take your friends with you.”

None of them stop. They won’t be intimidated. Allison draws an arrow.

“I can’t,” Kira says, voice steady. “When I looked at the game, I realized who I was actually playing.” Kira comes to a stop, looking right at her mother. “You.”

Noshiko falls still. She stops trying to deter them, and, instead, stares them down.

“Call them off,” Allison says, aiming the arrow right at Noshiko.

“You think you can take him alive?” Noshiko asks, a humorless smile on her lips. “You think you can save him?”

“What if we can?” Kira asks.

“I tried something like that seventy years ago. Your friend is *gone*,” Noshiko says.

Isaac sort of hates her. For someone who is almost entirely to blame for this situation, she doesn’t seem to have any remorse. Noshiko is so blinded by her beliefs, so certain she’s right, that she’s not even willing to try. Isaac sort of pities her.

“Are you sure?” Kira says, stepping forward. “Or if Stiles doesn’t have to die, maybe Rhys didn’t have to die either?”

The oni wave their swords through the air, the motion trailed by billowing black smoke. Noshiko smiles, all of her attention focused on her daughter.

“I see I’m no longer the fox now, Kira – you are.” Noshiko’s smile falls. Her voice turns firm, “But the nogitsune is still *my* demon to bury.”

It reminds Isaac of Allison’s earlier words. *We all have our demons, and we can’t face them alone.* It’s a sentiment Noshiko could benefit from hearing right now. It’s uncanny how perfectly fitting the words are. Isaac holds them close to his chest, protecting them and himself.

The oni vanish, but Noshiko holds her ground. She’s pretending to

take accountability, but it's just a mask. It's a cover. All she's really doing is living in denial. She's stuck in the past. All she's really doing is getting in the way. She needs to step aside. She needs to accept that it will be different this time. She needs to relinquish control. She needs to realize this isn't her fight.

Suddenly, Noshiko gasps. She opens her palm. Resting in her hand is a familiar yellow-green glow. A firefly. Then, as suddenly as it appeared, it disintegrates in a small puff of smoke.

"Mom," Kira says.

"What is that?" Isaac asks, voice hushed. "What does it mean?"

"It means there's been a change in ownership," Stiles' voice sounds throughout the courtyard.

Isaac twists around. It's not Stiles. It's the nogitsune, and he's not alone. He's backed by the shadowy figures of the oni. They're protecting him.

"Now, they belong to me," Void Stiles says, a dark smirk coming to rest over his features.

Isaac shifts into his werewolf form, Allison draws her bow, and Kira pulls out her sword. Then, Void Stiles steps back, and the oni attack. The courtyard fills with the sound of metal against metal as the fighting breaks out.

Isaac is full of so much fear and so much anger. He lets it fuel him. One of the oni comes at Isaac, but he's ready. Isaac grabs the sword, uncaring for the cuts it's digging into his palm. Instead, Isaac bends the oni's arm backward, knocking the sword away. Isaac pushes the oni to the ground, roaring in its face.

Another oni is heading his way, so Isaac quickly moves to his feet, abandoning the first. He ducks out of the blade's reach and swings his claws. He scratches through the oni's middle, digging his claws in as deep as possible. Isaac uses the momentum of the swing to do a full spin, rounding on the oni and slicing again. He grabs the oni by the arms, throwing it backwards.

The oni staggers to regain its balance. Allison shoots an arrow. It hits the oni's chest, but bounces right off. The arrow clatters to the ground, having no effect other than drawing the oni's attention to her.

Isaac growls, pulling the oni's focus back onto him. It charges at Isaac, sword blade flying through the air. The blade connects with Isaac's middle, pulling a horizontal cut across his stomach. Isaac cries out in pain, but he doesn't stop fighting. He kicks the oni in the chest, dislodging its footing. The oni stumbles, but another is already there.

The oni swings its blade, aiming for the already bloodied section of Isaac's torso. Isaac dodges the sword, leaning his weight backwards to avoid the sharp edge. The oni swings again, but, this time, Isaac ducks. The blade sweeps over Isaac's head, just a breath away from his hair. Isaac feels the air ripple above him. It's like a small gust of wind, tickling over his forehead.

Then, the oni utilizes its non-sword-wielding arm to push Isaac backward. Not expecting the blow, Isaac loses his stability and topples onto a wooden crate. He falls hard, arm twisted and painful. The impact serving only to exacerbate his already present injuries.

Isaac doesn't have enough time to recover. The oni is looming overhead, its sword coming down at him. Isaac braces himself for the pain. He curls in on himself as much as he can, trying to escape a fatal blow.

But then, there's a metal clang.

Isaac looks up, surprised by the sight laid out before him. Allison is blocking the oni's sword with the body of her bow. She's stepped into the middle of the fight, she's put her life at risk just to save Isaac's. It stuns Isaac still.

Allison pushes hard against the sword, twisting her bow to send her strength downwards. She forces the sword back to the oni's side, but she doesn't stop there. She follows through with the movement, bringing the bow back around. She uses the already existing power, and changes its direction. She channels all of that energy and vigor into one strong punch, hitting the oni across the face with the metal of her bow. The force sends the oni and its sword in opposite directions.

Isaac's body comes to life again. He jumps back into the fight, getting between the oni and Allison. She might have slowed it down, but she hasn't stopped it. In fact, none of them have. The oni remain undefeated and undeterred. They just keep fighting.

Isaac turns to Noshiko, the one person who might be able to help them. He shouts, "How do we stop them?"

She yells back, “You can’t!”

And then, just as quickly as Isaac looked away, a sword collides with his middle. Isaac lets himself get distracted for just a second, he lets himself look away for a single moment, and that’s all it takes. That’s how fast the fight is moving, that’s how fast the tables can turn. The sword slashes through Isaac’s skin, sending his blood splattering through the air.

That’s all it takes for Isaac to lose his ground. The swords keep coming. They crash into him one after another. They’re tearing him apart. They’re ripping him to shreds. They aren’t stopping.

Isaac’s going to die.

He knew this was a possibility, and he was okay with it. Isaac was prepared to die for Stiles. He was glad to do so.

In the past few months, despite the horrors he’s witnessed, Isaac has experienced more happiness than he ever thought he would. Isaac has experienced a sense of belonging. That’s all he ever wanted. And he owes it to Stiles.

So, when Isaac falls to his knees soundlessly, he’s ready. He’s had more than his fair share of second chances. He’s cheated death over and over again. It’s about time it caught up to him.

Isaac blinks, and then everything comes to a halt. There’s no final moment. There’s just an oni, standing there with an arrow protruding from its chest. The arrow doesn’t fall to the ground. It just stays there.

Isaac blinks, and then the oni’s sword falls to the ground. There’s no sound from the oni. There’s just the clatter of metal hitting the ground. Then, there’s silence. Everyone and everything goes still. They all watch and wait.

Isaac blinks, and then an inhuman screech projects from the oni. There’s no blood. There’s just a blinding yellow-green light shining from the point of impact. The oni reaches up, trying to pull the arrow from his chest. Isaac squirms backwards.

Isaac blinks, and then the ground begins to shake. There’s no body. There’s just an explosion of black smoke. The oni disappears. It dies.

Isaac blinks, and then Allison is impaled on a sword. There’s no build up. There’s just Allison’s blood painting the ground and Lydia’s

echoing, earth shattering shriek of, “*Allison!*”

It only takes five blinks for everything to change.

Everything fades away. The power fades from Isaac’s body, leaving him human once more. The oni fade from the camp, disappearing in billows of black smoke. Allison fades away, dying in Scott’s arms.

“Did you find her? Is she okay? Is Lydia safe?” Allison pants, voice barely a whisper.

“Yeah, she’s okay,” Scott says soft and earnest, stroking Allison’s hair.

In less than a minute, Isaac and Allison have switched places. It’s a sickening twist of fate. Isaac was ready to die. He was on the brink of it. This is his fault. Allison was trying to save him. It was supposed to be him. It should be him. It’s his fault.

“I – I can’t,” Scott says, desperately grabbing Allison’s hand. Scott hasn’t realized it yet. He still thinks Allison has a chance. He’s a fool and Isaac can’t bear it. “I can’t take your pain.”

“That’s because it doesn’t hurt,” Allison says. Her body has gone so still. There’s just the tears running down her cheeks and the small smile on her lips.

It all happened so fast. Allison is dying, and Isaac isn’t ready. Isaac was ready to lay down his life to save his friends, but he wasn’t ready for this. Allison pulled a fast one on him. She stole the sacrifice play right out from under him. Now, Allison is dying, and Isaac isn’t ready.

He’s not ready to lose her. She only just came into his life. Isaac isn’t ready to say goodbye. He isn’t ready.

“It’s okay,” Allison says. “It’s okay, it’s okay,” she repeats. “It’s perfect. I’m in the arms of my first love.” Allison’s breath is shuddering. “The first person I ever loved. The person I’ll always love.” There’s blood on Allison’s lips. “I – I love you. Scott. Scott McCall.”

“Please, don’t,” Scott begs. He’s crying, pulling her closer. “Allison, please don’t.”

Isaac’s starting to realize it. He isn’t going to get to say goodbye. Allison only has a few moments left, and she’s where she needs to be. She’s where she’s meant to be. Isaac can’t take this moment from either of them. He doesn’t want to.

So, he stays there, and he watches.

Isaac watches Scott hold Allison in his arms. Isaac won't ever get to hold her again.

Isaac thinks back to that night, the night when Derek and Argent were taken into police custody. Now, looking back, it seems like such a minor setback. But, that night, in that moment, it seemed the worst thing in the world. That night, Isaac and Allison found comfort in each other. That night, Isaac held Allison in his arms.

Isaac hugged her. He remembers it so vividly. He remembers thinking he should have held her tighter. He remembers thinking he should have held her longer. He remembers thinking he should have never let her go.

Isaac will never get to hug Allison again. He only ever got one hug and he squandered it. He wasted it.

"You have to tell my dad," Allison says. "You have to tell my dad. Tell him. You—"

Isaac blinks, and then Allison's breath leaves her body. Her eyes close. Her arm falls to the ground. There's no goodbye. She's just gone.

She's gone and Isaac will never get to tell her much she meant to him. Isaac will never get to see her kind eyes or her warm smile again. Isaac will never get to hug her.

She's gone and Isaac isn't ready. He isn't ready to part with her yet.

She's gone. She died saving Isaac's life, but it wasn't worth it. Isaac isn't good like Allison was. Isaac isn't kind like Allison was. Isaac isn't brave or strong or determined like Allison was.

Isaac is nothing like her, and he never will be.

Allison is gone.

Divine Move

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 3 episode 24

Word count: 6,012

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Can you tell us what happened?” Parrish asks, voice gentle.

“They tried to steal our car,” Isaac says softly, echoing the story Scott had grilled into him.

“Who?” Parrish asks.

“Two people... They wore masks. I couldn’t see their faces.”

I couldn’t see their faces. They were covered.

Everything reminds Isaac of Allison. He can’t escape her. He doesn’t want to escape her. He wants her here. He wants her warm smile, her kind eyes, her soft embrace.

“And then what happened?”

“I – I think one of them had a knife,” Isaac says quietly.

The image of Allison impaled on the oni’s sword flashes through Isaac’s mind over and over again. Every time he blinks, he sees her blood on the pavement.

“Can you remember anything else?”

Isaac remembers all of it, but he doesn’t understand it. Isaac can’t wrap his head around it. In one moment, Allison was killing one of the oni. In the next, she was dying in Scott’s arms.

“Anything else?” Parrish repeats. “Isaac?”

Isaac didn’t see the oni coming, he just saw its sword thrust through Allison’s middle. He didn’t have a chance to save her. There wasn’t enough time.

"I'm sorry," Isaac whispers, words sounding weak. He can't look at them, but he can feel Stilinski's hand on his shoulder. "It just happened so fast."

The questioning comes to an end. Scott and Lydia have already left, but Isaac doesn't mind. He doesn't want to see anyone.

Isaac doesn't really think about following Argent home, he just does it. He has seven missed calls from Derek, but he doesn't want to hear his voice. He doesn't want to see Scott or Melissa tonight either. He can't handle the McCall warmth, not when his whole body feels so cold. Not when his heart feels frozen in his chest.

So, Isaac trails after Argent and neither of them say a word about it. They stay in complete and total silence as Isaac follows Argent into his car, then into the elevator, then into the apartment.

Argent hesitates in the entryway, leaning his weight against a side table. Isaac can hear his breath shuddering as he tries to keep his composure. He doesn't look at Isaac, but he does break the silence, saying, "I appreciate the concern, but you don't have to stay." He pauses. "I'll be all right."

Isaac studies Argent. There are some signs of struggling, some signs of his resolve crumbling, but they're subtle, almost imperceivable to the naked eye. Isaac, on the other hand, is a mess. The tears remain in his eyes and every breath feels like agony.

"I've dealt with this before. I uh—" Argent turns in Isaac's direction, but he doesn't look at him. He moves around Isaac, making for the door, like he's going to show him out. "I have a capacity and... an ability to compartmentalize my emotions."

Isaac turns. His voice breaks, "I don't."

Maybe Isaac should, after everyone he's already lost, but it feels different this time.

Argent slowly lifts his eyes to meet Isaac's own. Argent finally looks at him. He finally sees Isaac, sees him for the broken shell of a person he is. And then, he pulls Isaac in, hugging him close.

Isaac falls apart. The tears come full force as waves of pain wash over him.

For so long, Isaac had grown used to losing the people closest to him.

He had learned to expect it. But then, something changed. Isaac stopped being resigned to it. He started to challenge fate. He started to hold tight to the people closest to him.

Isaac started to let people in. He started openly caring and being cared for in return. Isaac stopped expecting death and destruction at every corner.

Isaac never could have expected this. He was never going to be ready for this.

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Isaac wanders into Allison's room. He can't stay away. He knows he should, but he can't.

Isaac should be doing a lot of things that he just can't. He should call Derek back. Or at least text him. There are eleven missed calls and who knows how many messages (Isaac refuses to check). Isaac should tell Derek he's safe, but he just can't bring himself to respond. As soon as Isaac opens the door, Derek is going to be there, apologetic and understanding. It's too much.

He should clean his injuries. Or at least take off his ruined jacket. The wounds from the oni's swords stay open along Isaac's skin. They pull as he moves, but Isaac welcomes the pain. It makes him feel real. It reminds him he's alive. And, once these marks fade, there will be nothing left of this night. There will be nothing left of this fight.

So, despite knowing it's not in his best interest, Isaac steps inside Allison's room. He paces the room with slow, cautious steps. It's a perfectly preserved time capsule. Allison was in here just a few hours ago. Her natural scent still lingers in the air. Breathing it in, Isaac can almost imagine that she's still around.

Isaac stops in front of Allison's dresser. There, among picture frames and stray makeup products, is a Chinese ring dagger.

Isaac carefully picks it up. He sits on the bench at the end of Allison's bed, cradling the dagger in his hands like it's something precious. To Isaac, it is. He remembers the pain of the dagger piercing his skin at Allison's hand. But, more than that, he remembers the day the air between them started to shift.

Yeah, well, you being happy really isn't a big priority of mine. Since you stabbed me... twenty times... with knives.

They were actually Chinese ring daggers, but... sorry.

That day, Isaac started to see Allison as more than just the enemy. He saw the human side of her, the mischievous side. He saw the beginnings of a real friendship with her.

Isaac turns the dagger over in his hand.

It's the same dagger Allison stabbed Isaac with in the fight against the kanima. It's the same dagger Allison held to his throat when he climbed through her bedroom window for the first time. It's the same dagger Isaac stole just yesterday in his attempt to kill the twins.

Isaac traces the dagger with his fingers. He presses down lightly, not enough to hurt or draw blood, but enough to feel its familiar sharpness.

"Careful," Argent's voice cuts through the quiet like a knife. "That one takes some practice."

Isaac looks up as Argent approaches. He releases a soft gust of air, feeling caught out. Reluctantly, Isaac hands the dagger over, letting Argent take away the small piece of Allison.

"When Allison was learning, she had to bandage her fingers because they got so raw," Argent says. "She wouldn't give up on it, though."

It sounds like Allison. Isaac never knew her to give up on anything. Or anyone, for that matter. She was always trying to prove herself, even when she didn't need to.

I can take care of myself.

Allison always wanted to go it alone. She always wanted to appear strong. She always wanted to handle it herself.

Isaac remembers when Allison was struggling after the surrogate sacrifice, when the effects left her unable to hold a bow without shaking. Isaac remembers being the one to validate Allison's fears. He remembers making the very intentional decision not to brush aside her worries, but to offer a solution. He offered her help.

Isaac had tried. He tried to take some of the responsibility off her shoulders. He tried to bear some of her load. But, in the end, it hadn't been enough. Allison was still the one to fire the shot that day.

Allison was still the one to make the ultimate sacrifice.

Isaac doesn't mention any of this to Argent. He ran into Oak Creek after Allison was already gone. Like Isaac, he hadn't gotten a goodbye, but he deserved one. More than anyone else, Argent deserved to say goodbye to his daughter.

With that in mind, Isaac says, "She kept trying to say something."

Isaac keeps his voice hushed, can't bring himself to speak any louder. He's bringing her death into the room. He feels like he's tainting the space with it, like he's darkening the atmosphere.

"What's that?" Argent asks.

"She was trying to say something to Scott," Isaac whispers. "'You have to tell him,' she said. 'You have to tell my father...'" Isaac sniffles, the emotion coming back up to the surface. Argent joins Isaac on the bench, sitting down beside him. "She didn't get a chance to finish it, but I'm sure it was just that she loved you."

"It's okay," Argent says, voice just as quiet as Isaac's. "It's okay. She – She, uh, she made a point of telling me earlier."

That brings Isaac to a pause, thinking: *did everyone get a goodbye except me?* As soon as the thought filters through his mind, Isaac regrets it. He wants to take it back, doesn't even want it to exist inside his own head. Isaac hates himself for it, pushing the question down as far as it can go, burying it deep inside himself.

Instead, he asks, voice wet, "Earlier?"

"There's a tradition we have," Argent says, still holding the dagger in his hand.

"The silver bullet," Isaac says. He remembers seeing the one Argent made. He remembers Allison holding it in her hand before she was submerged in the ice bath.

"She was making a silver arrowhead," Argent explains. Then, unexpectedly, he hands the dagger back to Isaac, patting his shoulder as he makes to leave. Isaac doesn't get a chance to appreciate the gesture, too caught up in the feeling settling inside him. It's an instinct, an intuition, a gut feeling.

Allison was making a silver arrowhead.

The words strike a chord within him. The arrowhead means something. There's something here, Isaac knows it. The realization is just out of reach, but Isaac knows it's there. He knows he can figure it out.

"Where is it?" Isaac asks, stopping Argent in his tracks and causing him to turn back around. Isaac clarifies, "The arrowhead?"

"Downstairs," Argent says apprehensively.

Isaac stands. The energy inside him is transforming. It's still pain and anger and sadness, but it's no longer stagnant. It's coming alive. It's shifting into focus. It's becoming motivation.

"I need to see it," Isaac says, already headed for the door.

"Why?" Argent asks.

Isaac stills. Throughout the fight, he watched as Allison's arrows bounced off the oni time and time again. Despite being a perfect shot, only one of Allison's arrows connected. Only one.

Allison was making a *silver* arrowhead.

"Because I have a feeling it isn't there," Isaac says. He doesn't wait, just assumes his words will be enough for Argent to follow, and they are.

The pair make their way down to the basement where a small armory is set up. Argent flicks the lights on, stepping up to a wooden table. Isaac stands beside him, watching as Argent carefully folds back a piece of black cloth. There, lined up on the fabric in a neat row, are four silver arrowheads.

"Why would she make four of them?" Argent asks.

"She didn't. She made five," Isaac says. "She made the first one and then she figured it out."

Allison had a knack for putting the pieces together. Isaac remembers when she figured out where the Shugendo scroll was hidden. It was a stroke of genius, a testament to her abilities. Allison saw the world in a way that no one else could. She connected the dots that others couldn't. She figured it out.

"She used the first silver arrowhead to kill one of the oni," Isaac says.

“We saw her do it.”

Isaac was about to die. The oni were closing in and he had nowhere else to hide, no more fight left to give. But, in an instant, Allison flipped the script. With no powers, with nothing but an arrow, she changed everything.

“How?” Argent asks.

“The same way you almost did,” Isaac says, locking eyes with Argent. “Do you remember when you told us about one of your first gun deals, the yakuza?”

“That meeting wasn’t *one* of my first deals. It *was* my first,” Argent says. He’s starting to catch on, Isaac can tell. The wheels are turning, but he’s not quite there yet. He doesn’t quite understand.

“The bullet that you used to shoot the oni. Was that a silver bullet?” Isaac asks.

“Yes,” Argent says gravely, confusion written in his eyes, “but it didn’t kill him. It just broke his mask.”

“Probably went straight through,” Isaac says, attention drifting as the memory moves to the forefront of his mind. He remembers the oni’s sword clattering to the ground. He remembers the oni trying and failing to pull the arrow out of its chest. He remembers the burst of yellow light, followed by an explosion of black smoke. “What if silver is – is like a poison to them? What if it needs to stay in the body?”

Isaac looks up at Argent, stepping closer. “What if that’s what she was trying to tell Scott?” The pieces are starting to slot together. Everything is starting to make sense. “What if that’s what she was trying to tell you, that she’d figured it out?”

Argent’s fingertips dance over the arrowheads, “These four were still setting when she went off to meet Scott.”

“We could stop them,” Isaac says, hushed. If he’s right, then Allison won’t have died for nothing. If he’s right, then they can avenge her.

“No,” Argent says, holding an arrowhead up to the light. “We can kill them.”

Taking the oni off the board could change everything. It might give them a fighting chance.

And so, Isaac and Argent spring into action. Argent gets to work assembling the arrows, affixing them with the all important silver heads. Meanwhile, Isaac pulls his phone out of his pocket, sifting through a dozen more missed calls from Derek and Scott. There, among the mayhem, is a single text from Stiles: **The school.**

“Everyone’s at the school, we need to hurry,” Isaac says. The message is time stamped from thirty minutes ago, meaning they really need to get a move on. They have information that could turn the tide, but it will be completely useless if they’re too late.

Argent finishes up the arrows as quickly as he can, then deposits them in a quiver and grabs a crossbow. He tilts his head towards the exit, and says, “Let’s go.”

Isaac and Argent rush out to his car, climbing inside. Argent peels out of the parking lot, racing down the streets and towards the high school.

The longer the drive stretches, the more nervous Isaac becomes. He’s running on fumes. This night keeps dragging on, getting longer and longer. It’s been hours since he last ate and even longer since he slept. He’s emotionally and physically exhausted.

He’s not ready for this fight. He knows it’s the big one. This is their final shot against the nogitsune, and Isaac feels empty. He feels like nothing more than skin and bones.

You can do this.

Allison’s words float up to the surface, appearing out of the depths of Isaac’s memory. Her voice is still so clear and crisp, almost like she’s there with him now. Isaac wonders how much time he has left until the sound of her voice fades and turns forgotten.

Where’s the guy who single handedly held a collapsing building over his head?

Isaac remembers this day. He remembers how scared he was to partake in the gun deal, and he remembers how much confidence Allison had in him.

Isaac, you’re the strongest person I know. You can do this.

It’s like she really is here. Isaac can hear her. He can hear her words of encouragement and how much she believes in him. Isaac can see her.

He can see her brown eyes and her reassuring smile. He can feel her. He can feel her warm embrace, the only one he ever got.

Isaac is exhausted, but he still has his love for Allison. He still has that. No matter what, it can't be taken from him. He lets it fill him up, he lets it flood his empty frame.

If Allison was willing to lay down her life to defeat the oni and save them all, then Isaac has to make sure that happens. He has to make sure her sacrifice means something.

Isaac can do this. He doesn't have a choice. He has to.

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When Isaac and Argent arrive at the school, they're immediately greeted by a cacophony of fighting. Isaac lets the growls guide him, leading himself and Argent closer to the battlefield.

As they approach the back staircase, the sounds start to rise in volume. Isaac knows the fight is just up ahead, so he falls back. He stays out of sight as Argent prepares to enter the arena.

From his vantage point above it all, Isaac looks down at the commotion, taking note of who is taking part. It's just the twins. And Derek.

The sight of Derek sends a small fluttering of guilt into Isaac's stomach, feeling bad for ignoring him all night. More noticeable, though, is the sense of calm that washes over him. Isaac still feels determination in his bones, he still feels ready to take on the world, but it becomes less frantic. The desperation turns steady.

Isaac sees his anchor, and it pulls him back into control. It centers him. He stabilizes.

Isaac ducks back down, staying low and maintaining the element of surprise as Argent takes aim. Isaac listens close. He hears the wind whistling past the arrow, followed by the dull thud of it piercing the oni. Isaac takes that as his cue, flipping onto the scene.

Isaac smirks as the fight falls still. The oni grapples at its chest, pulling the arrow free, but it's too late. Neon yellow light pours from the wound. And then, the oni bursts open in an explosion of shadowy darkness.

They were right. *Allison* was right.

“What was that?” one of the twins asks, all three blue-eyed werewolves looking at them in stunned surprise.

“Silver,” Argent says in lieu of a proper explanation.

Without a moment’s pause, Derek yells, “Isaac, the box! Get the triskele box to Scott!”

For a split second, Isaac and Derek’s eyes meet, connection locking between them. Then, Isaac takes off. He grabs the cylindrical wooden box, engraved with the familiar triskele symbol, and sprints into the school.

Isaac runs through the hallways, following Stiles’ bellowing scream of pure agony. It’s a heart wrenching sound, one that chills Isaac to the bone. He can only hope it isn’t the real Stiles. Regardless, it pushes Isaac forward, forcing him faster.

Thunder rumbles above, practically shaking the entire school. The lockers clang and the ceiling tiles wobble. The fluorescent lights start to flicker on and off, painting the dim hallway in alternating shades of warm and cool, yellow and blue. Isaac taps into his last preserves of energy, speeding up impossibly more.

Then, a faint buzzing meets Isaac’s ears. He slows. Isaac removes the lid from the box, holding a piece in each hand, readying himself for what’s to come.

Isaac rounds the corner into the next hall. There, stumbling through the air, is the fly. It’s easy to miss, but Isaac spots it at once. He doesn’t hesitate, just closes the box over the fly, capturing it. Isaac fits the pieces together, screwing the lid on tight and keeping focused until he’s certain the fly is secure.

When Isaac does look up, the first thing he sees is Stiles, Lydia, Kira, and Scott all wearing matching expressions of fear laced surprise. The second thing Isaac sees is the body of Void Stiles, dropped to his knees and convulsing on the floor.

His body moves in inhuman ways, jerking and swaying and flailing. Until, suddenly, the movements cease. Void Stiles goes perfectly still. All the color drains from his face as his skin appears to harden, turning to stone. Then, cracks form along his forehead and run lines down his cheeks. He deteriorates.

Void Stiles wilts. He tips forward, collapsing to the ground. On impact, his body disappears into a puff of darkness. Then, as if a gust of wind blew through the hallway, the smoke drifts away. It fades into nothing.

Everything goes still.

The real Stiles starts to stir and stumble. Isaac rushes forward to grab him, but he's too late. Stiles falls to the ground with a very human thunk.

For a moment, Isaac thinks the worst has happened. He's staring down at Stiles' deathly still body, and he thinks they failed. They did everything they could to save him, but it still wasn't enough. It still led to this.

Isaac is staring down at Stiles' deathly still body, and then he sees his chest rise and fall. Isaac blinks, and then Stiles' heartbeat reaches his ears.

"He just fainted," Scott says, kneeling at Stiles' side with laughter on his lips. He takes his jacket off, pillowing Stiles' head with it.

They all crowd around Stiles, waiting for the moment he wakes. Isaac stays standing, holding the triskele box tight against him and surveying Stiles. He still looks horrible. His skin is still shockingly pale and the dark circles under his eyes stay sunken and deep purple. He looks horrible, but he's alive.

Fortunately, Stiles isn't out for long. It takes a minute, but then his eyes flutter open. He stares up at the group, attention landing on Isaac for a second before it falls back to Scott.

"Oh god. I fainted, didn't I?" Stiles asks, causing various degrees of smiles and laughter to filter through the group. "We're alive. Are we all alive?"

Scott pauses. Isaac knows he's thinking about Allison. Still, Scott gives a small nod. "Yeah, we're okay."

Then, Lydia stands. She moves slowly, air shifting around her. She's peering out in the direction of the double doors, the ones that lead to the back of the school. She doesn't say anything, just starts moving towards the exit, picking up the pace as she goes.

She doesn't say anything, but Isaac knows. Someone is dead. *It's Derek.*

His heart is stuck in his throat. *It's Derek.* His breathing stops. *It's Derek.* He follows. *It's Derek.* Isaac bursts out into the night. *It's Derek.* There are figures silhouetted in the darkness. *It's Derek.* Isaac can see a body among them. *It's Derek.* He doesn't know who it is. *It's Derek.* Lydia is crashing into Stiles' arms. *It's Derek.*

Isaac moves to take a step closer, but Scott catches his forearm. Isaac turns. Scott looks at him, eyes sad, and mouths, "*It's Aiden.*"

Isaac properly takes in Lydia's reaction, noticing the second figure kneeling over the limp body. The picture starts to become clear. It's not Derek.

The first thing Isaac feels is relief.

Then, immediately after, soul crushing guilt slams into Isaac. The impact sends him stumbling backward, falling a step behind Scott, who tightens his grip on Isaac's arm. Isaac catches his balance, but the guilt still has a hold on his lungs.

Isaac never forgave Aiden.

Whether or not Aiden was deserving of his forgiveness is entirely irrelevant now. It doesn't matter. It's too late.

Second chances aren't so bad.

Isaac never gave Aiden a chance to earn his forgiveness. Allison wanted him to. She wanted Isaac to move forward, to be better, but he couldn't. Isaac didn't have her kindness or grace. Isaac is jaded and harsh, and he never gave Aiden a chance. Isaac couldn't even give him that.

Maybe Aiden didn't deserve forgiveness, but he also didn't deserve to die. Maybe no one does.

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As the dust settles, the adrenaline dissipates and grief comes to take its place. It's an all consuming thing. It's tearing Isaac apart from the inside out. It's too much. It's too raw. It's too hard.

Isaac can't do this. He doesn't want to do this. He doesn't want to face this pain. He doesn't want to go through this.

He wants to shut down. He wants to accept defeat. He wants to give

up.

Every instinct in Isaac is screaming at him to run. He wants to escape. He wants to flee. He wants to disappear and never be heard from again.

He feels exposed. He feels like everyone is looking at him. He feels like the walls are closing in.

He wants to hide. He wants to run. He wants to face it all on his own.

But then... Isaac thinks of Allison.

Allison always wanted to go it alone. She always wanted to appear strong. She always wanted to handle it herself, but she was *learning* to let people in. And Isaac likes to think that, hopefully, he was part of that change. Allison was starting to let others carry the weight every now and again, she was starting to let *Isaac* carry the weight.

Maybe Allison didn't like to ask for help, but she was learning to accept it when offered. She was learning that she needed it.

We all have our demons, and you can't face them alone.

Isaac might not have gotten a proper goodbye with Allison, but he won't let her final words go to waste.

And so, Isaac turns to the one person he feels he can truly lean on in this moment. Isaac turns to Derek, and he's already walking towards him. It's like Derek could sense Isaac's on the brink of collapse because, before he knows it, Derek is there.

Isaac falls into Derek's arms without hesitation. Derek holds him strong and firm, arms wrapped tight around him. He strokes his hands along Isaac's back, one drifting up to cradle Isaac's head and pet his hair.

Isaac's whole body is shaking. He can feel himself coming to pieces, but Derek is there. He holds Isaac together. He supports him, physically and emotionally. It's not what Derek has always done, but it's what they are *both* starting to do for each other. They're starting to depend on each other in a way neither of them have depended on another person since they were kids.

We all have our demons, Allison had said.

We just can't let them win, had been Isaac's initial response. He's been letting his demons win. He's been letting them control his life. He's been letting them make his decisions.

Yeah, and you can't face them alone, Allison had added. It wasn't a correction, it was a continuation. Isaac has to do both. If he wants to take control of his life, if he wants to rid his demons of their power, then he has to learn to accept help. He has to learn that he needs it. He can't do this alone.

So, as the sun starts to shine over the horizon, Isaac pulls back from the embrace. His face is wet with tears he didn't know were flowing, but he doesn't care. He stays close, not wanting to stray from his anchor. His rock. His family.

"I, uh, I want to move in with you," Isaac says, voice quiet in his vulnerability.

Derek's eyebrows lift in surprise. "Really?"

Isaac nods, "I mean, you have to get me a real bed, but—"

Whatever Isaac was about to say is cut off by an *oof!* as Derek reels him back in. Isaac lets out a tiny, barely there, very wet laugh. He hugs Derek, and Derek hugs him.

Isaac is still falling apart. He's still running on fumes. He still feels exhausted in every sense of the word, but the night is ending and he doesn't feel so empty anymore.

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Isaac has been hiding out in the McCall's guest bedroom for the past two days. When it came time to call the police for the second time that night, Isaac had been sent back to the house. He tried to wait up for Scott, but, by then, the fatigue had taken over. Isaac fell asleep after a quick shower and hadn't fully woken again until now.

Now, as much as he wants to, Isaac can't sleep anymore. As hard as he tries, it just won't pull him under. Now, Isaac can't escape the grief that's tugging at his loose threads. Now, Isaac hasn't properly seen Scott since before Allison's death, and, the longer he waits, the harder it becomes.

Isaac bites the bullet.

He wanders out of the room, searching for something; though, what that something is, Isaac isn't sure.

He finds Scott and Melissa in the kitchen, Scott wrapped up in his mom's arms as he cries. Isaac can smell the heartache and suffering in his chemosignals, coming off him in waves and strengthening with each shuddering exhale. The emotion is so strong Isaac feels like he's choking on it.

He stops just on the precipice of the room, hesitating for half a breath. Isaac considers turning to leave, but then Scott's head tilts up. His wet eyes land on Isaac, widening at the sight of him. Then, they soften.

Scott extends an arm, placing it palm up on the table. It's an invitation. Isaac looks from Scott's hand to his eyes, then back again. He crumbles.

Isaac rushes closer, falling into the seat next to Scott and taking his upturned hand in his. Isaac knows it was just a gesture, just a display of welcome, but he needs something to hold onto. He needs *someone* to hold onto. Besides, Scott doesn't seem to mind. He just squeezes Isaac's hand.

It's exactly what Isaac was looking for.

Time stretches on, but the room stays quiet. Apart from the shaky inhaled breath and the soft sound of tears, only silence passes between them. There's nothing to be said. There are no words that can bring Allison back, and none that can do her justice. So, no one says anything. They just stay tethered together in silence. Melissa keeps her arms wrapped around Scott, and Scott keeps holding Isaac's hand. They just keep holding on tight so they don't float away.

Every once in a while, Melissa will meet Isaac's gaze. Each time, without fail, it starts up a fresh round of tears. Isaac can't help it. There's something so safe about Melissa, something that makes vulnerability seem not so scary. And, after yet another one of these spells, Melissa reaches across the table, placing her palm over Scott and Isaac's still joined hands. Isaac cries a little more.

Surprisingly, it's Scott that eventually breaks the silence. When the emotions have reached their peak and started to wind back down, he says, voice wobbling, "Argent's taking the triskele box to a place in France. He's leaving tonight."

"What about a funeral?" Melissa asks.

Scott shakes his head. "After what happened with Kate's, he doesn't... he doesn't want to go through that again. He says we'll honor her another way. In our day to day lives."

It's a nice thought. Isaac knows he'll be carrying Allison with him everywhere he goes for the rest of his life. He'll keep her love, her words, her lessons. He'll keep it all in a special place in his heart. A place reserved for Allison's sharp blows and even softer smiles. A place reserved for the dichotomy of Allison Argent.

"I don't know if he's coming back," Scott says, voice hitching. "I think he might be leaving for good."

The words spark something in Isaac. Argent is running, and, again, every instinct in Isaac is screaming at him to go with. Isaac thought he had tamed this demon, but, apparently, it's going to be a more stubborn one than that. Isaac should have expected it. All his demons are horribly persistent.

Isaac takes a deep, quivering breath. He reminds himself again and again what Allison's sacrifice was for. She died saving *his* life. She died so he could live to fight another day. She died so they could win the war, and they did. It cost them everything, but they did it. They won.

Isaac survived only by Allison's sacrifice. He wants to run, but he has to stay and fight. It's what Allison would have done. Allison wasn't fearless, but she was brave where it counted. In the dichotomy of Allison Argent, fear and bravery can coexist. She walked the line, she flirted with giving up, but she never did. She let terror and courage fuel each other. It made her stronger. It made her the strongest person Isaac will ever have the privilege of knowing.

Isaac is alive today because of Allison, so he's going to carry on for her. He's going to live a life that would make her proud. He's going to live each day for her. He'll do it all for her.

And, in doing so, Isaac has to be brave even when he's terrified. So, he blurts out, "I'm moving back in with Derek."

His voice is quiet and scratchy from the lack of use and the tears shed, but Scott and Melissa can hear him well enough. They turn their eyes over to Isaac, expressions twisting into shock.

Neither one says anything, so Isaac knows he has to continue. "As soon as he offered, I knew I wanted to, but I was letting my fear hold me back and... I don't want to do that anymore."

Melissa's expression is the first to ease. "Well, I'll be sad not having you around the house anymore, but I'm – I'm proud of you, Isaac."

Isaac starts to cry again. The tears pour down his cheeks without his consent. He tries to hastily wipe them away, but nothing gets past Melissa. She makes a soft noise of shock and distress, then rounds the table, pulling Isaac into an embrace.

Scott is smiling at Isaac over Melissa's shoulder, something small and fond. He says, "I'm glad you're going for it. Not 'cause I want you gone, but because I think it'll be good. For both of you."

"But if Derek messes up again, we'll kick his ass," Melissa says. It's a stark contrast to the way she's gently rubbing Isaac's back, making him crack a smile of his own. He might only be moving across town, but he'll keep a place in his heart reserved for the warmth of the McCalls too.

A week later, Isaac once again has his meager belongings packed away into a single duffel bag. Except, this time, Isaac isn't running away from the loft, he's running towards it.

He's going home. It's not a throw away statement, it's a feeling. He can feel it in his bones as he enters the building. This is where Isaac is meant to be.

Isaac takes the elevator. There's a familiar stirring in his chest, an uncomfortable panic, but Isaac pushes through it. He doesn't force it down, but, instead, he lets himself feel it. He lets himself feel uncomfortable, and then, instead of running, he keeps moving forward.

It's still hard. Isaac's hand still shakes as he presses the button for the top floor. His heart rate still rises with each subsequent level. He still sighs in relief when the elevator dings and the doors slide open. But it's progress. He's getting somewhere.

Isaac steps up to the loft's metal door. He pauses, taking one more moment to breathe in this feeling of *right*. It runs through his veins, wrapping around his heart like a length of twine.

Then, Isaac pulls the door open – which still isn't locked, by the way. He expects to find Derek waiting for him, already has a snarky comment on his lips, but the loft is empty.

All that's waiting for Isaac is an array of bullet casings littering the floor, the scent of blood, and a cardboard box with the words **BED FRAME** printed across the side in big bold letters.

Chapter End Notes

Taking a week's break between seasons! See you on March 15th for the start of season 4 :)

The Dark Moon

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 4 episode 1

Word count: 12,900

Chapter Notes

Welcome back for season 4! Get ready for some longer chapters!

Isaac kicks the cardboard box. It dents and caves in, but it doesn't give him any relief.

Derek is gone. Again. They can't catch a break. The tragedy never ends. Every time Isaac thinks he's free of it, it flares up again. Isaac is tired. He's exhausted. He's lost everything.

He can't lose Derek too.

Isaac picks up one of the bullet casings, turning it over in his hands. There, embossed in the gold metal, is a skull. *At least it's not a fleur-de-lis*, Isaac thinks.

Isaac has to call someone. He knows that. He can't handle this by himself, but he doesn't know who to contact.

In his heart, instinctively, Isaac wants to call Scott. He's his werewolf emergency contact, he's his alpha. Scott is safety and support. Scott would know what to do, but Isaac can't burden him with this. Not now. Not so soon after Oak Creek. It hasn't even been two weeks.

Isaac has been with Scott through the worst of it. They're still in the worst of it, really. Isaac stopped crying days ago. He has nothing left to give. He's crossed into a phase of numbness. Scott hasn't. Every night, Isaac listens to Scott's soft sobs through the wall. Scott tries to be quiet, but werewolf hearing is a tricky thing. Isaac has given Scott as much as he can. As much space, as much comfort. Whatever Scott needs, Isaac has tried to provide it. Isaac can't give Scott this. He can't call him.

In his mind, logically, Isaac wants to call Lydia. She's a banshee. If Derek is dead, Lydia would know. She could give Isaac answers, but he can't burden her either. Not now. Not so soon.

Lydia didn't just lose Allison. She lost Aiden too. And Lydia, like Isaac, didn't get to say goodbye. Worse than that, she knew what was going to happen. Lydia knew that if they found her at Oak Creek, then Allison would die. She tried to stop it, but it didn't work. Isaac and Allison found her message, but they didn't heed the warning. And then, Allison had died. She died saving Isaac.

Isaac and Lydia didn't get to say goodbye. And Lydia, like Isaac, is probably blaming herself for what happened. Isaac isn't all that close to Lydia, but he recognizes her pain. He sees what she's going through, and he can't call her.

With Scott and Lydia ruled out, Isaac's remaining option is obvious. He has to call Stiles.

Still, Isaac is hesitant to do so. Stiles has only been free of the nogitsune's clutches for a week and a half. Stiles isn't just grieving the loss of Allison, he's also physically and mentally recovering. The nogitsune took something from Stiles. He took an innocence from him. He tainted him.

Isaac doesn't want to call Stiles, but he knows he has to. In part because it's his only option, but also because Stiles would want him to. Isaac understands Stiles. He sees Stiles. And so, Isaac knows: Stiles doesn't want to be treated with kid gloves. He doesn't want pity.

After everything Stiles has been through, Isaac owes him that much. Isaac will do what Stiles has always done for him. He'll match his energy. He'll meet Stiles where he's at. So, Isaac picks up the phone and calls Stiles.

For a moment, Isaac thinks the call is going to go to voicemail, but, eventually, Stiles answers. Even through the phone, he sounds tired. *"Hello?"*

"Hey, I need some help," Isaac says, traces of panic in his voice. It lingers between the words and settles over the phrase.

"Oh, shit, what now?" There's movement on the other line, like Stiles is already getting up.

"Derek's missing. I was supposed to move in today, but there's bullet casings and it smells like blood and—"

Stiles interrupts, *"Okay, I'm on my way. You're at the loft?"*

“Yeah,” Isaac says, trying to breathe. The panic is getting stronger. It’s building up inside Isaac, trying to take over. It’s got a hold of his lungs.

“I’ll be there in ten just – just try not to wolf out or anything,” Stiles says, then he hangs up.

Isaac just stands there, frozen in place with his phone in his hand. Today was supposed to be the start of something new. Isaac was supposed to start living in Allison’s honor. He was supposed to take the leap. He was supposed to move in with Derek.

Now, all Isaac’s left with is fear and the residual, ever present feeling of loss. It’s one Isaac has grown accustomed to over his life. It used to come and go, but not anymore. It’s been stagnant since Oak Creek, making itself at home in Isaac’s chest. It’s a hollow feeling, like a hole is opening up inside him, spreading with every breath. Isaac isn’t sure it will ever go away. If he loses Derek, Isaac is certain it won’t.

Isaac kicks the box again. The hard object within comes in contact with his toes, but it doesn’t hurt. Isaac kind of wishes it did. He’s been numb for days, but the hurt is starting to reignite. Derek’s disappearance is adding fuel to a fire that had burned down to embers. It’s a shock to Isaac’s system, one that he can’t handle.

Isaac has time to run. Stiles won’t be here for at least five minutes. Isaac could flee. He could let someone else deal with this. Like Derek, he could disappear.

But Derek didn’t run. Derek didn’t leave of his own accord. If the bullet casings and blood weren’t enough to make that obvious, then Isaac’s trust in Derek is. Derek wouldn’t leave Isaac. Not now. Not so soon.

The day might not be going as planned, but Isaac doesn’t have to give up. He can still start living for Allison. In all honesty, the commotion gives Isaac all the more reason to do so. Allison died for Isaac – for everyone – knowing that they had a tough battle ahead. She died knowing that it wouldn’t be easy, but her sacrifice would give them a better chance at survival.

Isaac has to hold on. He has to keep living in spite of his fear. He has to stay. The only way Isaac can influence what happens, is by staying. He has to hold on.

So, Isaac starts picking up the bullet cases, lining them up on the

metal table. He sets them down in a neat row accompanied only by the soft clink of metal against metal. Isaac works methodically, pouring all of his focus into the simple task.

When the casings are cleared from the floor, Isaac's control starts to dwindle. It's hard to keep his shift in check when his anchor is missing and could be hurt or dead. Isaac struggles to stay above the panic, but, luckily, Stiles arrives before the wolf can rear its head.

"Hey, what's going on? Where is everyone?" Stiles asks, entering the loft. He approaches the metal table, taking note of the bullet casings.

Isaac hasn't seen much of Stiles since that night. Scott has been coming and going from the McCall house, visiting Stiles frequently and regularly, but Isaac hasn't. He's been focused on moving out and dealing with his own grief.

And, maybe, Isaac has been avoiding Stiles. Not because he blames him or doesn't want to see him, but because Isaac is nervous. He's scared to say or do the wrong thing – a strong possibility where Isaac is involved. Isaac doesn't know how to interact with a fragile Stiles. Usually, Isaac and Stiles' conversations are full of harsh jabs and unrelenting sarcasm. Isaac has never been scared to push Stiles, but he is now. Stiles is so close to the edge. Isaac doesn't want to be the one to send him over the cliffside. Isaac would never be able to forgive himself if he did.

But, now, Isaac doesn't have a choice. He's seeing Stiles. He's visibly worn down. He hasn't had a chance to gain back the weight he lost, leaving him thin and frail. His skin is still pale, apart from the dark circles under his eyes, leaving him gaunt and ghostly. There's exhaustion written all over him. Isaac wonders whether Stiles has slept at all. He doubts it.

Stiles looks sick, and it's a reminder of how vulnerable he is. Stiles is only human. He's human, but there's something about Stiles that runs deeper. There's so much inside him. So much goodness and light. He's only human, but he's also something else entirely. He's a force of nature. If anyone can get through this, it's Stiles. Though that doesn't mean he won't need someone to lean on. Isaac hopes he can be that person.

"Isaac?" Stiles speaks, drawing him out of his daze.

"Uh, you're the only one I called," Isaac says, answering his previous question.

Stiles follows it up with another, “What? Why didn’t you call Scott?”

Isaac swallows. “I didn’t – I didn’t want to bother him. There’s a lot going on at the moment.”

Stiles rolls his eyes. It’s such a familiar expression. Even after everything, Stiles is still Stiles. He’s himself once more. It’s a comfort. That is, until Stiles says, “You’re an idiot, you know that?”

Isaac’s mouth drops open, offended. He stutters, trying to come to his own defense, but the words just aren’t there.

“Listen. I’m gonna be nice about this, just because you’re you, but do you seriously not realize that Scott would do *anything* for you? You’re not a burden,” Stiles says.

Isaac doesn’t want to go there. He doesn’t want to talk about this. He’s embarrassed and tired and anxious.

“Can we just focus on Derek?” Isaac asks, voice soft and quiet.

“Fine,” Stiles says, like he’s giving in for now, but not for good. It’s the best that Isaac is ever going to get from Stiles. “So, what happened? You showed up and Derek wasn’t here?”

Isaac nods, “Yeah, the bullet casings were all over the floor and it smells like Derek’s blood.”

“Do I even want to know how you know it’s Derek’s blood?” Stiles asks, expression wrinkling in disgust.

“It’s a werewolf thing, I guess,” Isaac shrugs. Then, “I – Stiles, I don’t know what to do. Derek wouldn’t leave on his own. *Something* happened to him.”

Stiles sighs, “Look, I know how important Derek is to you, but I think we have to give it a few days before we panic. Derek is strong, he can defend himself.”

Isaac frowns. He doesn’t like this plan. He wants to do something now. He needs to act. He can’t sit in the not-knowing. He hates it. It gnaws at his skin and his sanity.

“Did you even try calling him?” Stiles asks.

Isaac goes quiet.

“Isaac,” Stiles groans. He’s exasperated, but there’s a small smile tugging at his lips.

“I wasn’t thinking straight,” Isaac mumbles, but it’s a weak defense. Still, Isaac pulls out his phone and scrolls to Derek’s contact. He calls, turning the phone on speaker and placing it on the table between them.

Stiles and Isaac stand on opposite sides, listening to the phone ring. With every passing dial, their hope drains until it’s put to rest entirely with a robotic, *“Please leave a message after the tone–”*

The tone is a harsh, stretched out beep. Isaac stumbles over his words, unsure what to say, “Um... Hey, Derek. Call me back. Let’s not do this disappearing thing again, okay?”

Isaac looks at Stiles, silently asking if he should say anything else. Stiles just shrugs, so Isaac hangs up, ending the voicemail. Isaac types out a text message: **Stop doing this to me. Come back to the loft.**

Isaac clicks his phone closed. “Now what?”

“We wait a few days,” Stiles says. Isaac’s face must reveal his disdain because Stiles exhales, slumping a bit. He continues, voice gone sympathetic, “I know it’s not ideal, Isaac, but we have to entertain the possibility that this is only a minor emergency.”

“When is anything ever a minor emergency around here?” Isaac counters.

Stiles smiles. “Never, but this could be the exception.” Then, “Come on, I’ll drive you back to Scott’s.”

Isaac gives in, allowing Stiles to take the lead. Maybe Stiles is right. Maybe this is nothing more than a minor inconvenience. Maybe Derek will handle this on his own, and Isaac will be moving into the loft in a matter of days. Maybe.

Stiles leads the way into the stairwell, and Isaac follows without complaint. He might have been able to keep his cool in the elevator ride up, but that was before his anchor pulled another disappearing act.

The drive to the McCall household passes in silence. Isaac and Stiles could try to talk and diffuse the heavy atmosphere in the Jeep, but it wouldn’t be real. They’re both comfortable enough with each other

now that they have no need for disingenuous positivity. They're both struggling, and they don't have to talk about it, but they also don't have to ignore it.

When they pull up outside, Stiles says, "Let me know if you hear anything. Or if you don't. You know I'm around."

"Okay," Isaac says, opening the car door and swinging his duffel bag over his shoulder. "Thank you."

Stiles nods, and Isaac exits. Isaac walks up to the front door of the McCall house, waving at Stiles as he pulls out of the driveway. Isaac takes a deep breath, steeling himself for the conversation that's to come. Then, he opens the door.

"Scott?" Isaac calls out, stepping into the house.

Scott appears at the top of the stairs. His chemosignals are wrought with confusion, but there's an underlying sadness. It almost hurts to breathe in, but Isaac has gotten used to it. It's the same heart wrenching sadness that has plagued Scott's scent since Oak Creek.

"Isaac? What're you doing here?" Scott asks, coming down the stairs. It's then that he notices the bag on Isaac's shoulder. "Oh... Something happened, didn't it?"

Isaac cuts to the chase, "Derek is missing."

"What?" Scott asks, faltering.

Isaac tilts his head, gesturing towards the living room. Scott nods and the two of them head into the other room, sitting side by side on the couch. Isaac sets his bag on his lap, unzipping it. He scoops up the pile of bullet casings, and drops them on the coffee table with a small clatter.

"I found these in Derek's loft, along with the scent of his blood," Isaac says. "I tried to call him, but he didn't answer. Stiles said we should wait a couple days and see what happens, but I'll have to postpone moving out. If that's okay?"

Scott is staring at Isaac, eyebrows furrowed. "You called Stiles?"

Oh. Isaac should have realized the detail would hold weight with Scott. "Uh, yeah."

“Why didn’t you call me?” Scott asks. He doesn’t seem hurt or upset, but his confusion has crossed into his voice now too.

“I, uh, I didn’t want to burden you with this... You have enough going on,” Isaac says. He doesn’t say Allison’s name – he can’t – but it doesn’t matter. They both know what he’s talking about.

“Oh,” Scott says, brows lifting in his understanding. “You could have called, Isaac. You can always call me.”

“Stiles already lectured me about it, it’s okay,” Isaac says, hands twisting together.

Scott narrows his eyes, almost like he’s inspecting Isaac. “And by ‘lecture’ you mean that he very nicely explained this to you?”

“Maybe,” Isaac says sheepishly. It makes Scott smile. It’s small, but present. Scott’s smiles have been few and far between recently. Isaac will take it as a victory, even if it is at his expense.

“I think Stiles is right,” Scott says. “We wait a few days, and if there’s still no word from Derek, we’ll figure it out. I promise.”

Isaac still doesn’t want to wait, but he knows they have to. So, instead of fighting it, he just says, “Well, it looks like you’re stuck with me a little longer.”

“Looks like it,” Scott says, still smiling.

Isaac brings his bag back to the guest bedroom, settling in to stay a little while more. Isaac doesn’t bother unpacking, but he does pull one special object from the bottom of his duffel. Then, Isaac flops down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

Isaac holds the ring dagger close to his chest, and whispers, “Where are you, Derek?”

—

The next few days drag on and on. Isaac spends each one agonizing over Derek’s disappearance and Allison’s death, falling back into the heart of grief. There’s no numbness left, only sharp pain and harsh panic.

Fortunately, when the third day has come and gone, Scott and Stiles keep their word. And so, they gather at Beacon Hills Animal Clinic to

figure out what happened and how they're going to fix it.

"Okay, so how long has it actually been since you heard from Derek?" Lydia asks as they enter the clinic, circling the table.

"A week," Isaac says. It's actually been eight days, but the others don't need to know that he's keeping count.

"And he hasn't gotten back to any of my texts," Scott says, setting a cylindrical metal container on the table.

"Has Derek ever returned your texts?" Stiles asks, which might be a valid question with Scott, but not with Isaac.

"Once. Definitely once," Scott says, like he's really thinking about it, really trying to remember.

"He hasn't texted me back either," Isaac interjects. "The last time that happened he was kidnapped while retrieving his mother's claws."

"Okay, when we get Derek back, we need to have a serious discussion about his blatant favoritism," Stiles says. It's a jab at Derek, but Isaac doesn't mind. Stiles is keeping the energy light. He's keeping things from getting too bleak by being his usual insufferable self. Isaac appreciates it.

Scott barrels ahead, ignoring Stiles' comment, "Isaac went to Derek's loft and found these." Scott opens the metal container, revealing the bullet casings. Stiles takes one out, holding it up to the light. Scott carries on, "I sent a picture to Deaton. He said that it's the mark of a family of hunters based out of Mexico. The Calaveras."

"What would they want with Derek?" Lydia asks.

There's a heavy pause. Scott's eyes pull away from Lydia, flicking over to Isaac. His mouth is parted and his expression borders on alarm. Isaac knows exactly what Scott is thinking. It's the same fear that Isaac has spent the past three days desperately suppressing.

Scott's trying to find a way to breach the subject without causing any upset, but Stiles, unsurprisingly, doesn't have the same level of tact. He blurts out, "You don't think they killed him, do you?"

Scott's eyebrows drop, marking his face with disappointment. Still, he exhales, and says, "I... I don't know." His attention turns to Lydia. "That's why you're here."

Scott pushes the container across the table, positioning it in front of Lydia. For a moment, she stays perfectly still, almost like she's thinking it over. She hesitates and the three boys watch closely.

Lydia breaks the moment with a small sigh. She accepts the mantle of responsibility, pulling the container the final inch towards her. She traces her fingers over the metal rim, circling it only once. Then, she plunges her hand inside. The casings rattle, filling the once silent room with the grating sound.

Next, Lydia lifts the container, tipping the contents into her hand. The bullet casings pool in her palm, close to overflowing, but not quite. Isaac watches as Lydia wiggles her fingers, getting a feel for the casings. She does this for a few seconds, then her eyes flutter shut and her hand stops moving.

Without warning, Lydia drops the casings. They hit the table with one metal clank after another.

Then, nothing. The last casing falls. Silence.

Lydia's eyes flit to Isaac's, but as soon as they meet, she looks away. She's unmoving. There's a shift in the air. The room turns grave.

"Lydia, what? Is he dead?" Stiles asks. He's the only one brave enough to do it.

"No," Lydia says. For one brief second, Isaac floods with relief. Then, she adds, "But I'm not sure he's alive either."

"What does that mean?" Isaac asks immediately. The fear is stirring up inside him, bubbling to the surface. He's been keeping it at bay, but only barely, only just. This is enough to cut him loose.

Scott places a hand on Isaac's shoulder. It's done without hesitation, but it's not harsh or sudden either. It's a careful movement. Scott is always careful with Isaac. His palm is warm on Isaac's shoulder. Even through the material of his t-shirt, Isaac can feel it. He lets it soothe him. It doesn't do much. It doesn't come close to touching the bone-deep terror of losing his anchor, but the shallow reach is enough. It calms Isaac's surface. It keeps him in control. It keeps his mind present.

"I don't know," Lydia says on an exhale. "There's something not right. I just... I don't know."

Isaac wants to get mad at her, wants to beg for more information, but he knows it's not her fault. He knows she's doing everything she can.

"So if the Calaveras have him, how do we find them?" Stiles asks, looking for the next most logical step.

Scott picks up one of the bullet casings, looking at it with intent. "We go to Mexico."

—

And so, that's what they do. Early the next morning, with the newest recruits of Malia and Kira, they begin their journey.

"It's a tight fit with six of us in the Jeep, but it's safer than splitting up," Stiles had said as Isaac climbed into the back, taking up one of the window seats.

Now, Isaac is paying for it. The girls squeezed into the back with Isaac and they all fit, but only barely. Isaac's right arm and leg are pressed up close to Lydia, touching at every point. At first, it was okay, but, now, they're two hours south and Isaac is starting to struggle.

Isaac is way too tall and way too claustrophobic for this. It would be too much for him even on a good day. And today definitely isn't a good day.

Isaac squirms in his seat, trying to find a position that alleviates one of the points of contact. It doesn't work, but, still, Isaac keeps wriggling. Lydia hasn't said anything about his incessant movement, but Isaac can't imagine he isn't bothering her. He tries to fall still again, letting his head thunk against the sun warmed window.

Isaac stares out at the expansive Californian desert, watching as it whips past them in blurs of brown sand and blue skies. Isaac tries to zone out, tries to disconnect his mind from the uncomfortable car ride, but he's not very successful. He's too riled up to properly dissociate.

Fortunately for Isaac, and probably the other passengers as well, Stiles takes the next exit. He pulls over along a quiet back road, and, there, they get out to stretch their legs and stop for lunch.

Isaac doesn't have much of an appetite, but he revels in the fresh air. He walks a few paces away from the Jeep, enjoying the outdoors despite the raging heat of the sunshine.

Isaac is scuffing his feet along the sandy ground when Stiles approaches. He throws a sandwich at Isaac, not caring to give him any heads up. Isaac's werewolf reflexes kick in and he catches the saran wrapped sandwich without even thinking about it.

Stiles comes to a stop next to Isaac. He looks even paler standing in the blazing sun, silhouetted by the orange desert backdrop and the bright blue sky. He looks so dull standing here, juxtaposed against the saturated scene. He looks faded down to gray, down to nothing.

"Are you wearing sunscreen?" Isaac asks.

Stiles glares at him, "Are you?"

Isaac shrugs, "Werewolf healing."

Stiles' glare deepens. Isaac just keeps looking at him, keeping his own face blank and expressionless. It's a skill Isaac picked up from Derek, and it's one that earns him a frustrated huff. "There's SPF 100 in the Jeep."

Isaac cracks a small smile. "Good."

A companionable quiet fall between them, but it doesn't last long. Silence never does where Stiles is involved.

"We're going to find him," Stiles says. Isaac isn't listening to his heart rate. He doesn't want to know whether Stiles believes it or not. Isaac doesn't say anything, but Stiles doesn't seem to mind. He just adds, "Hurry up and eat. We need to get going soon and you're not eating in the Jeep."

Then, Stiles walks away, rejoining the group.

Isaac sighs and unwraps the sandwich. His stomach is twisted up in knots, lurching with every thought of Derek, but he eats the entire sandwich anyway. When he's done, he balls the saran wrap up in his hand and approaches the Jeep.

Upon seeing Isaac, Stiles clasps his hands together, and says, "Okay, let's get this show on the road!"

Isaac is moving to climb into the back of the Jeep when a hand grabs his wrist. Isaac stops, turning to see Scott.

"You can ride shotgun," Scott says, like it's nothing. There's a knowing

glint in his eyes, a brief moment of eye contact. But, before Isaac can react, Scott lets go and steps around him.

For a second, Isaac doesn't move. He just stands there in stunned surprise. Scott's kindness is never ending, becoming a sort of constant in Isaac's life, but it still manages to catch him off guard sometimes. This is a quiet kind of kindness, one that wraps around Isaac's middle, securing and protecting him.

But then, the others have loaded in and Isaac is blinking back to life, taking up his new spot in the passenger seat. Nobody says anything about the change in seating arrangements. Stiles just starts the Jeep and they pull back out onto the highway.

Isaac spares a glance at Scott, who flashes Isaac a small grin. Isaac looks away. He stares out at the open road, and shares in a smile of his own.

—

The party is a living, breathing thing. Dozens of bodies grind and sway together, moving as one single entity. Somehow, Isaac is supposed to look like he's a part of it.

Malia digs an elbow into Isaac's ribs. "You're terrible at this. Go join Scott before you blow our cover."

Malia's words are blunt, but it's not out of cruelty. It's just her way of speaking. Besides, all she's trying to do is keep the plan from crumbling. It's in Isaac's best interest to listen, so he does. He nods and begins to work his way through the crowd, but he doesn't rush. He continues bobbing his head and trying to look like he belongs until, eventually, he joins Scott.

"Hey," Isaac says, settling next to Scott. They're standing in a dark corner, hiding in plain sight among the party stragglers.

"Everything okay?" Scott asks, seeing as Isaac has broken formation.

"Malia sent me away, I was being too obvious," Isaac says, keeping his voice pitched low so as not to draw attention.

"Yeah, we probably should have accounted for your awkwardness when we were coming up with the plan," Scott says. There's a playful gleam in his eyes.

Isaac huffs an almost laugh. A smile breaks through his features as he shakes his head, “Yeah, whatever.”

Scott smiles, but it’s not quite genuine. It’s forced.

“What is it?” Isaac asks, recognizing the change. “Can you hear them?”

“Only barely,” Scott says. His smile slowly falls away, slipping into a frown.

“What are they saying?” Isaac asks, curious and concerned. Isaac tries to find the sound of Stiles or Lydia’s voices, but the party is too raucous.

“It doesn’t matter,” Scott says. Isaac knows that can’t mean anything good, but Scott doesn’t let him press the issue. Instead, Scott adds, “We need to spread out. Go over to the bar, you look older.”

Isaac doesn’t question it. He just nods and follows Scott’s orders. Once again, Isaac finds himself worming his way through the crowd of people. Everyone is pressing in too close, sweat damp skin meeting Isaac’s in an uncomfortably slick slide. It’s strangely intimate in a way Isaac can’t say he likes, but, luckily, he’s able to break through the throng before it gets the better of him. Isaac sidles up to the bar, finding a spot along the far end. He rests an elbow on the counter, leaning there as casually as possible.

There’s a girl – maybe a year or two older than them – making eyes at Isaac from a few paces away. Isaac entertains her for a moment, using her attention as a ploy to blend in. Isaac meets her gaze, but he keeps the rest of his senses focused on the room around them, waiting for the time to act.

When the hunter comes up behind Isaac, he’s ready. Without turning around, he grabs the hunter’s wrist just as his gun is being raised to Isaac’s temple. Isaac winks at the girl across the bar, then he fights.

Isaac turns to face the hunter, simultaneously twisting his wrist until his arm runs out of give. The hunter grunts in pain and his gun slips from his grip, dropping to the ground with a clatter. Isaac uses his hold on the hunter to pull him closer, smirking as their eyes meet. Then, Isaac slams the hunter’s head down onto the lip of the bar with great force and quick ease. Blood blossoms from the hunter’s hairline and his eyes go glassy.

Isaac drops the hunter to the ground with a satisfying thunk. Isaac steps over his alive but unconscious body, finding the others waiting for him. Scott looks at Isaac, then down at the hunter. He almost looks impressed. Isaac ignores the pleased feeling tickling in his stomach.

“You good?” Scott asks.

“Yeah, let’s go,” Isaac says.

Scott opens a heavy, wood door, leading Isaac, Kira, and Malia into a much quieter hallway. They move quickly but with caution, taking care to check their surroundings for potential threats.

They travel deeper into the hallway, becoming more unsettled with each step forward. Isaac catches Scott’s eye, finding his own nerves reflected there. Silent communication passes between them, a question of *Where are the other guards?* and *Something doesn’t feel right* going unspoken but not unheard.

The connection breaks and that’s when they see it. Up ahead, coming from around the next corner, is a shaft of smoke. It’s low to the floor, pointed in their direction and starting to billow. Scott sticks an arm out, blocking Isaac and the others from getting any closer.

Suddenly, two more columns of smoke erupt, coming down from the ceiling. Immediately, the smoke starts to fill the hallway. It burns at Isaac’s eyes, clouding his vision, and, on his next breath, his lungs burn too. Isaac knows what this is.

“Wolfsbane. It’s wolfsbane!” Scott shouts, echoing Isaac’s thoughts. Isaac hears Scott yell to Kira – the only one immune to wolfsbane’s effects – but it’s a distant thing. Isaac is compulsively coughing, trying to force the poison from his body.

The smoke is all around them. It’s already infected Isaac’s lungs, and, with every breath, his airway seems to narrow. Isaac chokes, bringing his hand up to his chest, clutching through his shirt, like he could claw the wolfsbane out. It’s infiltrating his system, weakening him from the inside out. Isaac’s vision blurs at the edges and his thoughts start to swirl. Coherency fades as Isaac drops down to his knees between Scott and Malia.

A figure looms over ahead. An older woman approaches, voice condescending as she says, “Someone who has been an alpha only a few months should be more careful when facing a hunter of forty years.”

“All we want is Derek,” Scott says. Isaac doesn’t know how he can still speak, Isaac is barely hanging onto consciousness.

“Ay, *lobito*, you’re a long way from home,” the woman says, staring down at them.

Isaac has stopped coughing, stopped trying to claw at his chest, but only because he doesn’t have the energy. The poison is warping his senses and abilities, his vision is flitting in and out. Isaac’s eyes drop closed, unable to hold his eyelids open even as he fights hard to do so. Pure willpower only does so much against an airborne toxin.

Isaac can only just make out Scott’s voice saying, “You don’t know where he is either.”

Suddenly, Isaac hears a crackle of electricity followed by a weak noise of pain. Isaac knows it’s Scott, knows he’s being electrocuted. Isaac fights harder to open his eyes, just so he can watch the woman hold the weapon firm to Scott’s chest, unyielding. Scott goes limp, falling to the ground unconscious.

Then, hunters descend upon them. Isaac is pulled up from the floor and dragged through the hallway. He tries to fight back, but his strength is gone. He can hardly muster up the energy to stay awake, let alone thrash in their hold or break free. Isaac is helpless to do anything as he’s thrown into a stone room.

Isaac hits the ground hard, face first, but forces himself to remain conscious. Isaac hears the familiar sound of a door slamming closed followed by a lock sliding into place. They’re trapped.

“Isaac, buddy, you awake?” it’s Stiles voice.

Isaac slowly rolls over, turning onto his back. He croaks, “Yeah.”

Isaac breathes in a new breath and, at once, notices the lack of poison in the air. Isaac gulps down mouthfuls of oxygen like a man dying of thirst, allowing the fresh air to cleanse his system. With each breath, Isaac’s clarity and strength restore themselves until, eventually, Isaac is able to sit up.

He finds Stiles and Kira talking in soft whispers, Malia sitting back against one of the walls, and Scott’s unconscious body in the middle of the floor. Lydia is nowhere to be found.

Isaac moves closer to Scott’s prone form, checking him over. His

heartbeat and breathing are steady and he hasn't sustained any lasting injuries. He's going to be okay. It's just going to take him some time to wake up after being electrocuted so mercilessly.

Isaac stands, taking a look around the cell. It's not a very big space.

"Don't start, Isaac. Just don't even think about it," Stiles says. He's standing over by the door, watching Isaac closely.

"It doesn't really work that way," Isaac says, voice coated in fake irritation. "It's not really in my control."

"I don't care. If you wolf out and kill us, I'm still blaming you," Stiles says. Then, "Come help us try the door."

Isaac acquiesces. It's a sliding door, so there's no doorknob, but Isaac worms his hands between the wood and the stone. He curls his fingers over the edge of the wood, and pulls. Isaac pulls back as hard as he can, exerting every iota of energy left in his body. He grunts and keeps trying with all his might, but it's no use. His fingers slip off the top of the door and he falters back a step.

"I'm sorry, I can't. It's—"

"Let me try," Malia interrupts, pushing herself to her feet.

Malia maneuvers Isaac out of her way, lightly shoving him back. Isaac can't be bothered to be offended. If Malia gets them out of here, he'll thank her.

While Malia tries the door, Isaac turns to Stiles, quietly asking, "Where's Lydia?"

"They took her, I don't know," Stiles says. He looks as terrified as he sounds.

Isaac nods. He doesn't know what he's supposed to say. He doesn't want to give Stiles an empty comfort, that's not how they operate.

"Did you hear what Scott said? Right before that woman attacked him?" Kira asks, changing the subject.

Isaac spares a glance at Scott. He still hasn't moved or woken up.

"Yeah, they don't have Derek," Malia says, giving up on the door and joining their little circle of conversation. "Which means we came all this way for nothing, and Derek might already be dead."

“We didn’t come here for nothing. We came to save Derek.” Isaac says, actually getting offended this time. “And he’s not dead.”

“Maybe he isn’t, but these hunters *don’t* have him and they’re probably gonna kill us,” Malia says, like Isaac is being purposefully obtuse.

“If they were going to kill us, they would have already,” Isaac says. He’s trying to hold his anger back, but it’s not an easy feat. He started losing control the moment that door locked. And now, the room seems to be shrinking, closing in on Isaac and Malia.

“Or they’re dragging it out and we’re all going to die for a guy that I’ve never even met,” Malia says.

Isaac growls. He doesn’t mean to, it just comes out. Malia growls back.

Stiles, like a man with a death wish or way too much trust in his friends, steps between them. He holds his arms out, saying, “Okay, okay, okay. Ease up, you two.”

Isaac closes his eyes, trying to ignore the enclosed space and the fear that Malia might be right. Maybe the hunters are going to kill them, but it hardly matters. Even if they do manage to make it out of here alive, the Calaveras were their only lead. If they don’t have Derek, then God knows where he could be. They’re never going to get to Derek in time. They’re never going to save him.

Derek might already be dead.

If he is, the Calaveras can go ahead and kill them. Isaac doesn’t care.

Isaac’s breaths are starting to come quicker. He knows he needs to calm down, he needs to get himself back under control, but he can’t. Derek is his anchor, but, right now, he’s also the trigger.

Control is slipping through Isaac’s fingers, same as his claws. Isaac squeezes his eyes shut tighter, burying his claws into his palms. He’s trying so hard, but he can’t keep it together. Not when Derek is hanging on by such a thin thread that even Lydia can’t predict where the dust is going to settle. Not when there’s a sealed door keeping them locked inside. Not when Allison isn’t here with them as she was supposed to be.

“*Isaac!*” a voice shouts. Scott’s voice. It’s always Scott.

All at once, Isaac's frayed edges start to knit back together. He slowly opens his eyes. The room is drab and gray, not even a single trace of gold. Scott stands in front of Isaac, two hands planted firmly on his shoulders. His warm brown eyes meet Isaac's blue.

"You're awake," is what Isaac says.

"Yeah," Scott nods, hands squeezing lightly. His voice is quiet, hushed for a semblance of privacy, "If we're going to find Derek, then you need to try to stay calm, okay?"

Isaac gives a nod of his own. He can't guarantee calmness, but he can try. He has to.

Scott releases his hold on Isaac, and moves onto the next course of action. He approaches the door, trying to open it the same as Isaac and Malia had. Though, just like Isaac and Malia, Scott doesn't find success. The door groans and grinds, but it stays firmly in place.

"We already looked for a way out," Kira says as Scott runs his fingers over the scratches marking the wall. "I think a lot of people have."

"I say when that door opens again, we take out whoever's standing in the way and run for it," Malia says, leaning against a stone pillar.

"What about Lydia?" Kira asks.

"What about her?" Malia fires back.

"We're not leaving without her," Scott says, stepping closer to Malia.

"Why not?" Malia asks. Her confusion is genuine, serving as a reminder that she's still adjusting to life as a human. They all turn to Stiles, who has the closest relationship with Malia, looking to him to handle it.

Stiles approaches Malia, talking to her directly. "Because we don't leave without people. Remember, we talked about this? Rules of the wild kingdom don't apply to friends."

Malia slumps a bit, almost looking chastened. Isaac starts to feel a little guilty for how quickly he had lost patience with her earlier. Clearly, she doesn't mean to offend, she just genuinely doesn't understand.

"Is that what you would do as a coyote?" Kira asks. "Leave her for dead?"

"If she was weak and injured, yeah. If hunting had been bad that season, I would eat her," Malia says like it's no big deal, and, to her, it isn't. "*Then*, I'd leave."

"Mmm. Believe it or not, that's progress," Stiles says. Isaac almost laughs at the absurdity of it all. He doesn't, but it's a near thing.

"All right, guys, we're not dead yet," Scott says, getting them focused. "And that means Araya wants something."

Isaac, hoping to remind them of the reason they came here, says, "But if the Calaveras don't know where Derek is, that means they weren't the one that took him from the loft. Right?"

"So, maybe someone else got to him first," Scott says, catching onto Isaac's implications.

Isaac nods. It's not outside of the realm of possibility, they just have to figure out who else would have a vendetta against Derek. Though, that's easier said than done. Isaac has often remarked that Derek has animosity with every person he meets. The pool of people with a grudge against Derek is almost limitless and full of strangers Isaac has never even heard the names of.

Before they get anywhere close to figuring it out, the cell door opens with a resounding creak.

Three hunters stand in the doorway.

Isaac readies himself for a fight, flicking out his claws and fangs, but it doesn't amount to anything. The first of the hunters immediately electrocutes Scott, knocking him out *again*. Isaac is about to lunge forward, but then there's a gun held to Scott's head.

Nobody dares to move a muscle. Isaac has no choice but to fall compliant, claws and fangs disappearing once more.

"The kitsune, come with us," one of the hunters says through a thick accent.

Kira glances around, expression warped in fear. Stiles gives her a small nod, and she steps forward. The hunters, along with Kira and Scott, leave the cell. The door slams closed.

As soon as it's shut, Isaac runs forward. There's panic running rampant in his body now. He bangs on the wood of the door, pounding so hard

his fists would be bruised if not for werewolf healing. When the door doesn't give, Isaac slashes at it with one desperate swipe of his claws. His breath is shaking with emotion as he leans heavy against the wood.

"Isaac," Stiles says, approaching from behind. He places a hand on Isaac's shoulder. Isaac throws him off.

"Stiles, don't come near me right now," Isaac says through gritted teeth. He needs to get this door open. He needs to get out of here. He can't be locked in here. Visions of the freezer are starting to float through his mind, and, now, it's not just Derek in danger. It's Scott too.

Stiles, once again proving he has a death wish, doesn't move. "No, no, I'm not going anywhere. You're gonna calm down. Freaking out isn't going to help Scott, you know that."

Isaac backs away from the door. His eyes dart around the room as frantic anxiety takes over. The walls are inching their way towards him. The room is shrinking and Isaac can't stop it. He can't help. He can't help himself. He can't help Scott. He can't help Derek.

He couldn't help Allison.

"What the hell is wrong with him?" Malia's harsh whisper drifts through the rising panic, reaching Isaac's ears. Apparently, nobody bothered to fill her in on Isaac's *issues*. Maybe that's why she was willing to pick a fight with him earlier.

Isaac's lungs are burning again, just like with the wolfsbane poison. Except this time, the poison is already inside him. It's always there, lying dormant and waiting to take him by storm.

Isaac stumbles backwards until his back hits the wall. He slides down it, pulling his knees up to his chest and resting his head in his hands.

"Isaac," Stiles' voice says. Isaac's head lifts. Stiles is standing above him, just out of reach with his palms held out in front of him. "Remember what Scott said? About how you need to try to stay calm?"

Isaac nods. His breathing is still rapid and his mind is still racing, but he remembers.

"Okay," Stiles says, taking a step closer. He carefully kneels down a

foot away from Isaac. “You’re not losing control. You’re just having a panic attack, okay?”

Isaac listens to Stiles’ words. He lets them wash over him. Isaac wants to believe Stiles is telling the truth, so he does. It’s easy to believe what he wants to hear.

“Hold your breath,” Stiles says.

“What?” Isaac asks. His chest is heaving fast, but it’s no match for the speed of his thoughts. His mind is a whirlwind of Scott and Derek and Allison. Then, of metal chains and taunting words and all encompassing darkness.

“Hold your breath,” Stiles says firmly. “You trust me, don’t you?”

Isaac blinks. He tries to focus on Stiles’ brown eyes. They’re lighter than Scott or Allison’s, speckled with flecks of golden sun. And they’re looking right at Isaac, and he’s asking him about trust. And Isaac trusts Stiles, trusts the familiar intensity in his eyes. So, Isaac nods, just a small, barely there movement.

“Then hold your breath,” Stiles says again.

Isaac does. He breathes in one more time, and then he just stops.

His lungs stop their raging, rapid motion, and everything goes still. The walls stop moving. They stay stone and steady, held back like Isaac controls them. That thought, that feeling of power, it slows Isaac’s heart. The urgency falls away. The fear is there, but it’s not in control anymore. Isaac is.

Isaac holds his breath until he can’t anymore. When it becomes too much to bear, he opens his mouth and the air trapped in his lungs spills out in a rushing exhale. Isaac starts to breathe again, but, this time, it’s slow and regulated. Isaac isn’t panicking anymore. The walls hold firm.

“See, I told you. Just a panic attack,” Stiles says. He’s watching Isaac closely, looking almost proud.

“How’d you know to do that?” Isaac asks, still a little breathless and reorienting himself gradually.

“Uh, just something Lydia taught me,” Stiles says with a hint of a smile. Then, “You think you can sit here and keep breathing?”

“Yeah,” Isaac says. He can definitely do that.

“Okay, great,” Stiles says. He moves away so the rest of the room comes into Isaac’s sight, including Malia. She’s standing a few feet away, watching them. Isaac ignores the small spark of embarrassment in favor of breathing deep into his diaphragm.

“Malia, I need you to try to hear what’s happening,” Stiles says, but then Isaac stops listening. He lets his eyes fall shut and leans his head back against the cold stone wall. He starts to breathe slow and even, giving it all of his attention.

Isaac’s eyes don’t open again until the lights start to flicker and Scott’s shouts reach his untrained ears. Only then does Isaac open his eyes. They land on Stiles and Malia, sitting together a few feet away. There are unshed tears in Isaac’s eyes when he hears Malia say, “They’re killing him.”

Isaac knows it to be true. He can hear it, he can feel it. It’s in his bones. Scott is going to die, and there’s nothing they can do about it.

Isaac feels like his heart is going to give out. He wants to fight, but there’s no way out, and he can’t risk losing control again. Not in here, not with Stiles locked in with him. There’s nothing Isaac can do. He can only sit here and listen to Scott’s dying screams.

Isaac wants to scream alongside him. Isaac doesn’t want this to be the last time he hears Scott’s voice. His screams are raw and pained, ripped from his lungs like he’s trying to hold them in. Isaac wants to cover his ears and drown out the noise, but he can’t bring himself to do it. The screams are better than the alternative.

Then, the silence hits. The lights stop flickering. Everything goes still and quiet.

There’s a scream of Isaac’s own building in his lungs, but he doesn’t have a chance to release it.

“Kate,” Malia says, drawing Isaac’s attention. “Scott just said the name Kate.”

The scream dies in Isaac’s throat. Scott’s alive. They haven’t killed him yet, but any relief is overshadowed by the chill of recognition. Isaac sits up a little straighter, locking eyes with Stiles.

Kate.

“That’s impossible,” Stiles says, sounding as shocked as Isaac feels. “It’s impossible. That can’t be what he said.”

“Why? Who – Who’s Kate?” Malia asks, looking between Stiles and Isaac.

“She’s a hunter,” Stiles says. “An Argent.”

Stiles doesn’t say anything more. He doesn’t mention that Kate is supposed to be dead, doesn’t mention the fire she started, doesn’t mention her sick relationship with Derek. And Isaac doesn’t either. He can’t. He’s too shocked, too stunned, too scared.

Isaac never met Kate, but he knows who she is and he knows what she did in the past. It doesn’t bode well for the present.

The door opens one last time. The same hunter stands in the doorway, but there’s no attack. He just says, “You’re free to go.”

—

Isaac leans against the Jeep as they watch Scott speak to Araya. They’re close enough that Isaac could listen in on the conversation if he wanted to, but he doesn’t. Instead, he tips his head back, having to squint his eyes in the glare of the sun. Isaac soaks in the warmth, allowing it to wash away the remaining dregs of anxiety.

When Isaac looks down, Araya is walking away and Isaac feels firmly rooted to the ground again. He feels anchored. So, when Scott walks towards the group, Isaac follows Stiles in meeting him halfway.

“So, what now?” Stiles asks.

“She thinks she knows where we can find Derek,” Scott says, immediately piquing Isaac’s interest. Maybe this wasn’t a waste of time after all.

“Did she tell you where?” Isaac asks.

“Uh, actually she’s giving us a guide,” Scott says.

Just then, an engine revs. A motorcycle drives through, stirring up sand and coming to a stop between the Jeep and Isaac, Stiles, and Scott. The rider lifts her helmet, and Isaac feels his heart stop.

It’s *the* girl. The girl who saved Isaac from the bank vault. The girl who saved Isaac from the alpha twins. The girl who saved his life. The

girl who, until now, Isaac thought was dead.

“You know her?” Stiles asks, lightly hitting Isaac in the chest.

Isaac stutters, “She’s, uh, she’s the one who rescued me from the alpha pack.”

“I thought that girl died?” Stiles asks as blunt as ever.

“Yeah, so did I,” Isaac says. He can’t believe what he’s seeing. He can’t believe she’s alive. There’s a big scratch along her throat, but she survived it. Isaac can’t believe it.

“Okay, someone fill me in, who is she?” Malia asks impatiently.

“I’m Braeden,” the girl says, finally giving herself a name. Isaac had never gotten a chance to learn it. Their time together was so brief and so impersonal that Isaac has only ever known her as *the girl*, and, yet, she was so important to him. Isaac was so touched by her sacrifice. She saved Isaac’s life, and she died because of it, or so Isaac thought. That thought, that reality, it changed something in Isaac. She died for him. And, now, here she is, alive and well. It’s a much needed win.

(The painfully poetic irony isn’t lost on Isaac, but he’s choosing not to think about Allison right now. He’s choosing to revel in the wonderstruck joy of this moment, of this victory. He’ll live in the loss again soon, but not yet. Not now.)

“She’s a mercenary,” Lydia says, which is news to Isaac, but he doesn’t even care.

“Right now, I’m the only one who’s gonna take you to La Iglesia,” Braeden says.

“The Church?” Lydia questions, eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“What’s The Church?” Stiles asks.

“It’s not a place you’ll find God,” Braeden says.

“But it’s where we’ll find Derek?” Isaac asks. Braeden’s resurrection has breathed life into Isaac’s hope, but it hasn’t put his anxiety to rest. He’s still worried about Derek. He hasn’t forgotten that Kate might be back from the dead too.

“Maybe,” Braeden says, like the outcome doesn’t really matter to her. “But there’s only one way to find out.”

Isaac casts his attention over to Scott, waiting for him to call the play. Isaac would gladly follow a practical stranger into the desert to find Derek, but he won't subject his friends to the risk. Not if they aren't willing participants.

Scott shrugs and says, "Well, we've come this far."

They ride in the Jeep in relative silence. The only sounds come from the occasional grinding of gears, the dirt crumbling in their wake, and the even breathing of the passengers. Isaac sits in the front seat once more, staring out at the desert view.

The closer they get to finding Derek, the more scared Isaac becomes. It should be the opposite, but he can't shake the feeling that something's not right. The journey certainly hasn't been easy up to this point, but the Calaveras were far too willing to let them go free. There's too much unknown and too much at stake.

"Okay, I'll ask," Malia says, cutting through the quiet and leaning on the center console. "Who's Kate Argent?"

She looks from Stiles to Isaac and back again. Stiles purposely keeps his eyes on the road, following close behind Braeden's motorcycle.

"Uh, I'd like to know too," Kira says from the back corner.

"I dug her grave," Isaac says, voice soft, but still loud enough to be heard. He was digging her grave the night he met Derek. Isaac's pretty sure that was just a coincidence, but, still, it sends a shiver through him.

"Yeah, and we were at her funeral," Stiles says with a quick glance towards Malia. "So, I'd like to know how she got out of a casket that was buried six feet under."

"She was never in it," Scott says, breaking his silence on the subject.

It wouldn't be the first time someone from Beacon Hills came back from the proverbial dead. It happened with Peter, then Jackson, and now Braeden too, apparently. Really, it's not that shocking at all.

"She was Allison's aunt," Lydia says, then lower, "and a total sociopath."

The Jeep falls into quiet again.

Isaac wasn't part of the fight against Kate and the hunters and Peter as the alpha, but he's learned enough by now to know it's not an exaggeration. Kate was a horrible person. She was the worst kind of hunter. She was the one who lit the Hale fire, who broke Derek down to nothing more than a shell of his former self. She tormented and destroyed him.

And, now, she's back from the dead.

"You don't have to talk about it now if you don't want to," Kira says amicably. It's clear she's curious, but she also senses the heavy nature of the topic.

Malia doesn't have the same sensitivity. "Um, yes, he does."

"Yeah, she's right," Scott says with an exhale. "You guys should know, you need to know."

Scott looks around, making pointed eye contact with Lydia and then Isaac. Isaac knows Scott is right. Kira and Malia deserve to know what they're getting themselves into. They need to know what's potentially in store.

"All right. Kate was the one who set the fire that killed most of Derek's family," Stiles says, finally getting to the heart of the issue.

"Some of them survived, like Peter," Scott says. He's looking dead ahead, eyes focused on nothing. Isaac thinks he might be reliving the memories right now.

"A very angry Peter," Lydia amends.

"Yeah, he's the one who bit and turned me," Scott says.

"And the one who finally caught up to Kate... and killed her," Lydia adds.

Isaac wasn't there to see Kate be killed, he's only ever known her as a phantom. A living memory, haunting Derek even now. If this is real, if she's really alive, Isaac doesn't know how Derek is going to handle this. Derek is strong, but he's not invincible. He's not without weakness.

"And we saw her buried," Stiles says, reminding them of the

impossibility of it all. Isaac understands his doubt, but, in Beacon Hills, Isaac has learned to expect the unexpected.

“No,” Scott says, looking up, eyes returning to the present. “We saw a casket, remember? She wasn’t in it.” Scott continues, “The Calaveras heard that Kate had been killed by an alpha’s claws. They wanted to make sure that she was really dead. Her body was healing, more and more, as she got closer to the full moon. She was coming back. So, they switched out the bodies. They took her. If a hunter is bit, they have to take their own life before they change... The Calaveras, they treat the code like law. They make it their responsibility to enforce it.”

“Good for her,” Malia says. “I wouldn’t do it either.”

Isaac looks at Malia, then back to Scott.

“Would you kill half a dozen people to get out?” Scott asks rhetorically. “Cause that’s what she did.”

There’s a moment of quiet contemplation. Each passenger stops and spends a moment thinking about the situation Kate was put in. Isaac wonders what he would do under the circumstances. Would he fight and kill for his survival? Or would he fall on his own sword?

Ten months ago, the answer would have been obvious. Isaac thought he would do anything to survive, but, now, he isn’t so sure. He’s had many opportunities to kill, he’s had reason to do so, and, yet, he hasn’t. Maybe because of Scott, but maybe just because of Isaac. Maybe he doesn’t have it in him to hurt people. At least, not like he thought he did.

“So, Kate’s a werewolf now?” Kira asks, interrupting Isaac’s introspection.

“I don’t know,” Scott says genuinely. “There’s a saying, sometimes the shape you take reflects the person you are.”

It’s a phrase that Isaac has become familiar with. Though, the last time it was applicable, the kanima was running rampant through Beacon Hills. Surely, that can’t be a good omen.

“What kind of shape is sociopathic bitch?” Lydia asks, not expecting an answer. Isaac has to bite down on a laugh.

Out of nowhere, something slams into the driver’s side of the Jeep. It hits them hard, causing Isaac and the others to be violently jostled in

their seats. Stiles mans the wheel, keeping the Jeep from straying off the road, and bringing them to a smooth but sudden stop.

Isaac is quick to climb out of the vehicle, knowing that the rest of the pack are following after him. He rushes around the front of the Jeep, inspecting for damage and looking for the source of impact.

“What happened?” Braeden asks, getting off her motorcycle a few feet ahead.

“I don’t know, it felt like we hit something,” Stiles says, continuing to search for whatever caused the collision, though without much luck.

“Scott, we need to get there by night. It’s too dangerous otherwise,” Braeden warns.

Isaac watches Scott, recognizing the change in his chemosignals. He’s conflicted.

Over Scott’s shoulder, Isaac locks eyes with Stiles. They share in a brief moment of wordless communication, both coming to the same conclusion. Scott needs to go ahead without them. It’s the only way.

“Go,” Stiles says to Scott, gesturing towards Braeden.

“Not without you,” Scott says, voice gentle. Isaac understands why Scott is hesitant to leave Stiles after everything they *just* went through. Isaac would be feeling it too if he were the one leaving, but they don’t have any other choice. Besides, they all need to start accepting that the nogitsune is gone. Stiles is safe. Or, at least, as safe as he can be.

“Dude, someone needs to find Derek. We’ll think of something, we always do. Just go,” Stiles says, patting Scott’s shoulder.

Scott isn’t convinced, but Stiles doesn’t let him protest. He releases Scott’s shoulder with a nod, giving his attention back to the Jeep and putting an end to the conversation. Scott pauses for just a single second more, then mouths, “okay,” and moves to follow Braeden.

Scott makes it three steps away before Isaac cracks. Impulsively, he half-walks, half-jogs to close the distance between himself and Scott. He grabs his wrist, saying, “Scott, wait. Just—”

Scott turns, making purposeful eye contact. “I’ll find Derek,” Scott says it like a promise, but Isaac doesn’t need it. He already knows Scott will do everything in his power to save Derek.

“No, that’s – that’s not. I was... I was just gonna say, be careful,” Isaac says, a little awkwardly. Even more so, he adds on, “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

It’s not exactly what Isaac means to say. What Isaac means to say is: yes, he wants Scott to find and save Derek, but not at the expense of his own safety. Isaac will never be okay with Scott so willingly getting hurt in order to save others, but Isaac doesn’t know how to express that, doesn’t know how to put it to words. So, instead, he just tells him to be careful.

“Oh,” Scott says.

Braeden disrupts the strange tension between the pair, calling out, “Scott, the sun’s going down!”

“Go,” Isaac says, tilting his chin towards Braeden.

Scott nods. Then, he leaves, mounting the back of Braeden’s motorcycle the same way Isaac once had. Isaac watches them speed off in the direction of the setting sun. They disappear around a bend, and only then does Isaac return to the Jeep.

Isaac rejoins Stiles, who has since popped the hood of the Jeep and started working on getting the car running again. Stiles looks over at Isaac, observing him carefully. “Say your own goodbye, did you?”

It’s a joke. Isaac can tell by the tone of Stiles’ voice and the gleam of mischief in his eyes, but Isaac can’t see the punchline. So, he just shrugs, “Yeah?”

Stiles laughs, something light and private, something Isaac still doesn’t recognize the humor in. He huffs, “Hurry up and fix the Jeep. It doesn’t feel safe out here.”

“I can feel it too,” Malia cuts in. Then, like she’s noticed something, she ducks down, kneeling beside the Jeep. She grunts as she reaches between the front wheel and the engine, pulling an object free. When she resurfaces, it’s with a long, sharp claw in her hand. “I don’t think we hit something. I think something hit us.”

Malia hands the claw over to Isaac. He turns it in his hands. It’s a dull white color, tip smooth and sharp all the way down to the base where it turns textured, marked with grooved rings. Dirt collects in the indentations, like the claw has been gouged into the ground. It almost looks like a bone.

“Stiles, seriously, hurry up,” Isaac urges.

He closes his fist over the claw, holding it tight until his knuckles go white. Trepidation worms its way under his skin. The feeling won't be taking leave until they get out of this desert. Whatever creature owns this claw has to be huge, and, whatever it is, it's out here with them.

The girls stand up ahead, looking out at the desert and watching for movement. Meanwhile, Isaac hangs back with Stiles, staying close to the Jeep and watching him work.

“Hey,” Isaac says quietly, breaching the silence. “Thank you. For earlier.”

“Huh?” Stiles says, voice muffled around the screwdriver held in his mouth.

“Back with the hunters. Thanks for stopping me from killing you,” Isaac clarifies.

“Oh,” Stiles says, taking the screwdriver from his mouth. Then, casually, “Malia would have killed you before you got the chance.”

Isaac glances at Malia, then back to Stiles. He frowns, almost a little offended, asking, “You think she's stronger than me?”

“What?” Stiles asks, only partly paying attention to Isaac. The majority of his focus is dedicated to the Jeep, tightening and checking parts.

All things considered, Isaac should probably let Stiles work and not distract him, but, now, he needs to know. He repeats, “You think Malia is stronger than me?”

“Oh, yeah, totally,” Stiles says without even thinking about it. He finally looks up at Isaac, seeing his hurt expression. Stiles laughs, “Sorry, bro.”

Isaac huffs, but doesn't say anything more.

Then, Lydia approaches, arms crossed over her chest. Only half serious, she suggests, “Maybe we should just walk.”

“Hey,” Stiles complains, practically on top of the car now, “I will never abandon this Jeep. You understand me? Ever.”

The wind shifts and a scent hits Isaac's nose. It's foreign and unfamiliar, completely unidentifiable. It's unmistakably alive, but there's something off.

"Work faster, Stiles," Malia orders, not taking her eyes off the horizon. "There is something out here with us..."

Here, out in the open, with no cover and no escape plan, they're sitting ducks. And they aren't alone. Something is out there, hiding out of sight and biding its time, waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike. They can't see the creature, but Isaac can feel the weight of its gaze. It makes his skin crawl.

They're being watched.

—

The sun has set, and they're no closer to getting out of this desert alive. Isaac stands at Malia's side, keeping watch for the danger lurking in the darkness. There's no sign of it yet.

"Lydia, could you please just hold the flashlight still for a second? It's really hard to see anything when you keep shaking it like that," Isaac overhears Stiles say. He sounds frustrated, but Isaac knows it's just fear.

"I'm shaking it like this because we're in the middle of nowhere with your broken down Jeep and we're being attacked by *yet another* razor-clawed monster!" Lydia cries out. And then, softer, voice shaking as much as the light, "And I'm terrified."

"Well, just be slightly less terrified!" Stiles fires back, not very helpful but trying his best.

Kira joins Isaac and Malia with her sword at her side, unsheathed and raring to go. "Anything?" she asks.

Malia shrugs, "It's too hard to see."

Kira turns to Isaac. And, with an unexpected twist, Isaac realizes she's looking at him for confirmation. She's looking at him to check their surroundings. She's looking at him and trusting his expertise. She's looking at him because, among the three of them, he's the most senior member of the pack. He's the most practiced. He's the most experienced. He's been here the longest.

In a startling moment of self awareness, Isaac sees himself through her eyes. He sees himself, not as the scared kid drifting through space without belonging, but as a foundational member of the pack. He sees himself as Derek and Scott's strangely-shared and not-technically-first beta, he sees himself making Stiles laugh when no one else can, he sees himself in the passenger seat. He sees himself in the inner circle. He sees himself as an integral member of the pack.

"Isaac?" Kira's voice draws him out of his thoughts.

Isaac shakes off his lingering daze, glowing his golden eyes with ease. He surveys the desert, drinking in the landscape. Unfortunately, even with night vision, Isaac can't see much of anything. There are bushes rippling in the wind and maybe a few out of place shadows, but Isaac can't discern friend from foe.

"Nothing," Isaac says, letting his eyes simmer back to blue.

"We should've brought another flashlight," Malia says dejectedly.

Kira looks down at her sword, and Isaac sees an idea forming in her eyes. She steps back, moving closer to the Jeep and holding the sword out in front of her. Carefully, Kira angles the blade, allowing it to catch the glow of the headlights. The blade amplifies and focuses the beam, shining light over the desert.

Behind a giant rock, something moves.

"Did you see that?" Kira asks fearfully.

Immediately, Malia roars. Her eyes turn blue and her fangs slide into place. She doesn't hesitate. She takes off into the wilderness, headed straight towards the boulder.

"Malia, wait!" Kira yells, darting forward in an aborted movement.

"Hey, Malia!" Stiles shouts, panicked. He drops his tools, shifting gears entirely and focusing all his attention on Malia's receding form.

Meanwhile, Kira stutters in her tracks. Her eyes flit between the desert and the Jeep. She looks torn, like she doesn't know what to do.

In an uncharacteristic act of leadership, Isaac rushes to say, "Kira, go after Malia. I'll stay here in case there's more than one."

Kira nods, easily following Isaac's instructions and disappearing into

the night.

“You, fix the Jeep,” Lydia says, pointing the flashlight at Stiles and pinning him in place.

It’s obvious Stiles wants to run after Malia. He wants to ensure her safety. He wants to abandon the Jeep

“Stiles, focus!” Isaac says. “Kira’s got this.”

Stiles groans. Clearly, he’s not happy about this, but, under Isaac and Lydia’s stern words and watchful gazes, he caves.

Isaac unleashes his claws and shining yellow eyes. He stays close to the Jeep, close to Stiles and Lydia. Isaac won’t let anything past him. No matter what happens, nothing’s getting through. Nothing’s going to hurt them.

Isaac zones in on one thing and one thing only: keep them safe.

He stands his ground and stays vigilant. He continues to look in every direction, waiting for movement, waiting for the fight. Except, it never comes.

Instead, out of nowhere, the Jeep starts up again.

Isaac is quick to usher Lydia and Stiles into the car. Lydia goes without argument. Stiles, on the other hand, doesn’t budge. He stands in the open doorway of the driver’s side, staring out at the desert and mumbling under his breath, “Come on, come on.”

“Stiles, get in the car!” Isaac yells from the opposite side of the Jeep. He’s not getting in either. Not until Stiles is safe and secure.

“Not without Malia!” Stiles shouts back.

“We won’t leave yet, just get in!” Isaac argues, but it’s no use. Stiles isn’t hearing him. His mind is made up, and there’s no changing it.

So, Stiles doesn’t move, and neither does Isaac.

Isaac’s heart is pounding in his ears, each beat counting another moment at risk, another wasted opportunity to get to safety. Isaac doesn’t care about meeting up with Scott or finding Derek, he just cares about Stiles. Isaac’s blood is boiling in his veins. He wants to wring Stiles’ neck, wants to force him into his seat, but he can’t. (Well, he could, probably, but he won’t.)

Then, Isaac sees the girls.

“There!” Isaac yells, pointing ahead.

Stiles still doesn’t move.

“Get in the damn car, Stiles!” Isaac shouts, frustration seeping into his words. *Is it really so unreasonable to ask Stiles to have one single ounce of self preservation?*

Malia and Kira sprint from the dark wilderness, coming out of the shadows and into Stiles’ view. *Finally*, he gets in the Jeep.

Isaac climbs into the back of the car, not caring about claustrophobia, just wanting everyone safe. He falls into the middle seat as Kira joins him in the back, taking up the spot next to him. Malia lands in the passenger seat, slamming the door closed.

Stiles hesitates.

“Drive!” Lydia all but shrieks, voice bordering on hysterics.

Stiles jams the gear stick forward and presses hard on the gas, speeding off in the same direction Braeden and Scott departed in.

When the worst of the crisis is averted and they’ve all stopped breathing so heavily, Stiles shouts, addressing Malia, “You... You please don’t do that ever again!”

“Do what?” Malia asks, a little confrontational, but only because she’s matching Stiles’ tone.

“I – I thought you just took off,” Stiles says, volume dropping. “I thought you were running.”

“I was running,” Malia says, genuine in her misunderstanding and taking things a bit too literally.

Stiles huffs a sigh, frustrated by her confusion and the fear she just put him through. “No, I mean, like, I thought you were *leaving*.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t leave without you,” Malia says simply. Her heart stays steady.

Isaac lets his eyes drift to the left, falling away from Stiles and Malia and the private moment they’re all witnessing. It’s an intimate exchange, one that carries significant weight and exposes their

blossoming connection.

In looking away, Isaac meets Lydia's eyes by mistake. Something passes between them, something like mutual understanding.

"Really?" Stiles asks. (He sounds genuinely surprised by it. He's an oblivious idiot.)

"No, I would never leave without you," Malia says, but, of course, she can't leave it at the touching sentiment. Instead, she has to look towards the backseat and add, "*Them* I would leave."

"Yeah. Uh, it's progress," Stiles says. Not for the first time, Isaac finds himself questioning Stiles' definition of the word progress.

Then, Isaac smells blood. It's not hard to find the source. Malia's shirt is torn open, and, there, across her abdomen, is a nasty gash.

"Shit, Malia, you're hurt," Isaac breathes, leaning forward to get a closer look.

"It's okay," Malia says with a shrug of indifference.

"Are you sure? It looks deep," Kira says, giving voice to the group's concern.

"Yeah, I can feel it healing," Malia says. Isaac can hear the wince of pain hidden in her words, but he also knows she's tough enough to handle herself. If she says it's okay, then Isaac will believe her. He leans back in his seat, letting himself start to relax, if only for a moment.

"You didn't see anything?" Lydia asks. It's a question more of confirmation than anything else. If Malia or Kira had seen anything, they would have said something by now.

"Barely," Malia says. She looks at Lydia, "It had a strong scent, though."

"Like what?" Stiles asks.

Malia breathes in deep, nose wrinkling as if she can still smell it. "Like death."

The words certainly aren't very comforting, but, whatever it was, Isaac doesn't think it was trying to kill them. It only slowed them down. It only stopped the Jeep and forced them to split up. If Malia

hadn't run in after it, the creature might not have attacked at all.

It had plenty of opportunity to kill them, but it didn't.

Whatever it is, whatever bears those razor-sharp claws, it isn't entirely animal. It has motive and the self control to enact it. But, whatever it is, it isn't entirely human either.

Suddenly, an earth-shaking howl reaches Isaac's ears. It rumbles across the desert, loud enough for even the non-wolves to hear, evident in the way the Jeep swerves at Stiles' hand. It's a familiar howl.

It's Scott.

"Stiles, hurry!" Isaac sits up straighter. Any calm he might have felt is taken over by a restlessly impatient urge to help, to save and protect.

Isaac's leg bobs up and down, his fist repeatedly tapping over his knee. His body is shaking with anxious energy that can't be tamped down or contained. He turns his head left and right, left and right.

"Isaac, we're almost there, just sit still! You're worse than Stiles," Lydia scolds.

"Sorry," Isaac mumbles. He tries to stop his body fidgeting, but he doesn't find much luck. Still, it doesn't matter because, less than a minute later, the remains of La Iglesia come into view.

Stiles maneuvers the Jeep through the ruins of the town, pulling up in front of the only building left standing. Just as he sets the car in park, a shaft of light bursts from the entrance of The Church. Scott and Braeden follow the flashlight out into the open air with a third body supported between them.

The pack rushes out of the Jeep to help, but, as they come closer, the third body becomes recognizable. Everyone stops.

Isaac would know Derek anywhere. Isaac is bonded to Derek by more than just his bite. The two of them are inherently connected, they're intertwined and entangled. The pieces of Isaac that stand here now, today, couldn't exist without Derek. They're inseparable.

"Is that him?" Malia asks. "Is that Derek?"

Isaac would know Derek anywhere. He would *recognize* him anywhere,

in any form. And so, this might not be the Derek that Isaac knows, but it's Derek nonetheless.

"Uhh," Stiles says, "sort of."

It's undeniable. It's Derek. But he's about eight years younger than he's supposed to be.

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 4 episode 2

Word count: 12,416

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When they arrive outside the animal clinic, it's started to rain. It always rains at times like this. Like the universe is mocking them. It's not a drizzle either. It's pouring rain, harshly beating against their skin, but Isaac doesn't care. His sole focus is Derek.

Young Derek is thrown over Scott's shoulder as they rush him into the animal clinic. They take Derek straight to the back room where Deaton is already waiting. Scott lowers Derek down, taking care to gently lay him on the metal table. He's completely unconscious, skin damp from the rain.

Deaton makes a soft noise in the back of his throat, sounding out his concern as he gets his first good look at Young Derek. His expression shifts to one of recognition, reminding Isaac that Deaton knew Derek as a boy, knew him when he looked like this.

"Wow," Deaton says, quietly stunned.

"Wow? Wow as in, 'I've seen this before and I know exactly what to do,' kind of wow? 'Cause that's the kind of wow we're hoping for," Stiles rambles.

It's never that kind of wow.

Predictably, Deaton says, "I think you might be overestimating my abilities."

Isaac turns his attention away from Deaton, long since past the point of expecting him to solve all their problems. (Maybe Isaac inherited that mistrust from Derek.) Isaac hands his focus over to Young Derek, drinking in his appearance. The resemblance is uncanny. It's so clearly him, but it's not the Derek that's supposed to be laid out before them. Derek is alive, but his fate is still hanging in the balance.

Isaac reaches for Young Derek's hand with the intention of checking for pain, but all he feels is the chill of his skin.

"He's cold," Isaac says, looking up at Deaton and placing two hands over Young Derek's. "Really cold."

Deaton takes Young Derek's other hand, holding it up and checking the temperature for himself. He starts examining Young Derek, finding his pulse and testing the dilation of his pupils.

"Do you think this is permanent?" Scott asks, finally putting into words what they've all been thinking since Young Derek first stepped out of La Iglesia.

Isaac squeezes Young Derek's hand. He hopes this isn't permanent. Derek might not be in any physical pain, he might be alive, but this isn't right. This isn't Derek. And when he was just starting to step into the light, when he was just starting to step into the person he's meant to be, this just isn't fair. Derek has been through enough. They all have.

"I'm not sure a medical diagnosis is even adequate," Deaton says. "This is well beyond my experience."

"So what do we do?" Isaac asks. He needs someone to tell him what to do. This is too much. He needs guidance, needs someone to tell him how to move forward, or he's going to crumble under the pressure. It's too much.

"Until he wakes up? Probably not much," Deaton says, looking at each member of the group. His gaze lingers on Isaac just a little longer than the rest. "It might be best to leave him with me. He'll be safe here."

"You mean from Kate?" Stiles asks.

"If she's alive and she is what you say she is, she won't be able to walk past that gate," Deaton says, which is true. Inside the clinic, Young Derek is safe from any *further* harm at Kate's hand, but the damage is already done. They just have to hope it isn't irreparable.

"Why would she want to do this to him?" Lydia asks.

"Knowing Kate, it's probably for a reason that won't be any good for anyone but her," Deaton says gravely.

Stiles adds, "And bad for everyone else."

But especially for Derek. Kate has already destroyed him once before. (Twice, if Isaac were to count the damage she inflicted while trying to catch the alpha. Isaac considers it a joint effort, an accolade shared by Kate *and* Peter. That time, they worked together, albeit inadvertently, to destroy Derek. They took the already broken and painstakingly reassembled pieces of Derek, and they crushed him.) Isaac won't allow Kate to do it again. He won't let her sink her claws into him. Isaac will do anything to stop her.

"You guys should probably go home," Deaton says. "He doesn't appear to be in any danger. So, maybe the rest of you should get some sleep? It is a school night... And you all need to start taking care of your own lives again."

"I'm not leaving him," Isaac says without any hesitation. He doesn't care that there's exhaustion tugging on his limbs or an English test waiting for him tomorrow. He's not leaving Derek. Not with this much uncertainty.

Isaac feels Scott's eyes on him like a heavy weight. He keeps holding Derek's hand, but finally pulls his gaze away to meet Scott's.

"Uhh, I'm so not okay with this," Stiles says, breaking the silence. It's not the protest Isaac was expecting. He was expecting push back from Scott, but definitely not Stiles. Still, he continues, "I mean, seriously? We're gonna leave self sacrificing Isaac here? With Derek? This is a horrible idea."

"Someone should stay with you," Scott says, mostly ignoring Stiles. It means he knows they can't convince Isaac not to stay, but it doesn't mean he won't try to ease the load from Isaac's shoulders.

"I'll stay," Lydia says, like it's an easy decision. Isaac looks at her, knowing the shock is plain on his face. Lydia shrugs, "My grades are fine... despite missing a few classes."

"Yeah, no, still don't like this," Stiles says, shaking his head.

"Guys, go," Lydia says sternly.

Stiles doesn't cave. Instead, he matches Lydia's tone, dragging out a, "No—"

"Text us if anything happens," Scott says, interrupting Stiles. He looks from Isaac to Lydia then back again. The tiredness is visible in Scott's eyes, but the warmth is there too. He looks at Isaac with

understanding, but, under the surface, there's a layer of concern.

Isaac gives a small nod of agreement, and Scott mirrors it. Then, he turns to leave, grabbing Stiles' arm as he goes.

"Nope, still not – not going anywhere. All right, just 'cause you're stronger..." Stiles continues to argue even as Scott pulls him from the animal clinic. Isaac watches them with a small, amused smile.

Once they're gone, silence falls over the clinic. Isaac keeps holding Young Derek's hand in both of his, refusing to let go. His wet hair is dripping down over his forehead, water droplets getting dangerously close to his eyes, but Isaac doesn't wipe them away. He just keeps holding Derek's hand, staying tethered to him. There's movement around Isaac, but he barely notices it. He just keeps watching Young Derek, noting every twitch and beat of his heart.

That is, until Lydia's voice breaks through the fog, soft and tentative, "Isaac?"

Isaac has to force himself to look up.

Lydia's holding a towel in her hands, hanging between them as an offering. Isaac glances back and forth between the towel and his hands joined with Derek's. He hesitates.

"Take the towel, Isaac," Lydia says, not unkindly.

She waits patiently a little longer, giving Isaac a moment. He strokes his thumb over the back of Young Derek's hand, squeezes lightly, and then, slowly, he lets go. He lets Young Derek's hand come to rest along his side.

Then, Isaac takes the towel from Lydia.

It's soft and fluffy and familiar, maybe even the same exact towel he used after the ice bath. It doesn't matter, and Isaac tries not to think about it, tries not to think about Erica. It'll only open up the world of pain Isaac is desperately trying to avoid.

So, he takes the towel and wipes over his wet skin. His face, his arms, his sopping hair. He stays quiet all the while, and Lydia, though she doesn't walk away, doesn't speak yet either.

She waits until Isaac is done, then she says, "You know, I don't have any *feeling* about this."

It's said to be a comfort, and it is, but only barely. It's a mere thing. Isaac doesn't expect Derek to drop dead. He doesn't expect him to succumb to whatever unknown damage Kate did to him. He doesn't know what he expects, but he knows what he fears. He fears this is irreversible. He fears that, in some capacity, Derek is gone. Like everyone. Like...

Isaac feels the tears in his eyes and abruptly turns his head, looking up and away from Lydia. This is too raw, too vulnerable, too real.

Lydia clicks her tongue. It's a soft, sympathetic noise. One that means, *oh, Isaac*. One that means, *poor thing*. Unexpectedly, Isaac doesn't hate the way it makes him feel. So, when Lydia says, "Come sit with me," Isaac goes.

He spares Young Derek one last look, one last hand over his shoulder, then he goes. He could stand over Derek all night. He would do so happily, he would do so without complaint, but he knows it isn't for the best. The best thing Isaac can do is follow Lydia's instructions. Sit with her, and listen. He'll hear when Derek wakes.

They take up a pair of chairs from the front room, pulling them into the back of the clinic and staying close to Young Derek. It's for Isaac's sake, he knows.

Silence blankets them once more, though it isn't awkward. Isaac is too lost in his own head to notice if it was anyway.

He can't stop thinking about Derek. They were so close. They were so close to starting fresh. They were so close to taking that leap of faith, to taking matters into their own hands. And, now, Isaac can feel their chance at happiness slipping through his fingers.

It's like Derek is already lost. He's right there, and yet he's so far away. It's a unique form of torture.

Derek is slipping through his fingers, and Isaac is struggling to hang on. He's struggling to hold tight to every memory, to every moment. And yet...

"I can't remember the last thing I said to him," Isaac says, ignoring the way his voice cracks.

Isaac isn't sure what he expects Lydia to say – maybe a reassurance that he'll get to speak to Derek again. Instead, she says, "I don't remember the last thing I said to her."

She doesn't have to say her name. They both know who she's talking about. It's hanging over them all the time. This loss, this grief.

Isaac looks at Lydia. She's staring straight ahead. She's trying to hide her emotion. There are no tears in her eyes or wavers in her voice, but her hands give her away. They're smoothing over her skirt again and again and again.

"It was before he took me," Lydia says. Her eyes flick to Isaac's for just a second. There's a storm of pain brewing in the depths of beautiful green. "But I... I can't remember. I wasn't paying attention. I didn't know I was supposed to be paying attention."

Isaac doesn't know what to say. He didn't get a goodbye with Allison, but he remembers the last time they spoke. It was meaningful. It wasn't goodbye, but it held weight and purpose. Isaac's been carrying their last words with him every day. He's been letting the words guide him. Not only that, but Isaac was there. He saw her when she died.

Lydia got taken by the nogitsune, knew Allison was going to die, and then never saw her again.

"I'm..."

"Don't say you're sorry," Lydia says. "Please."

"Okay," Isaac says. Then, "It's not your fault. We saw your message, we just..."

"I don't... I don't think it's my fault," Lydia says with a steady heart. "But *you* do, don't you?"

Isaac pauses, mulling the words over. He doesn't blame himself for her death, doesn't feel guilty or at fault, but he does blame himself for surviving. He blames himself for being the one who got to walk away.

"I just think it should have been me."

"You know she'd want to slap you if she heard you say something like that," Lydia says honestly.

Isaac exhales a soft, wet laugh. It barely counts for anything, but it happens nonetheless. "Yeah, she..." Isaac swallows. "Allison looked at me like no one else did."

"What do you mean?" Lydia asks. She keeps her voice hushed, but it's

animated in her curiosity.

Isaac doesn't know why, but he feels safe here, sitting with Lydia. Safe enough to say, "Like she saw something in me... Like I was something special."

Lydia doesn't say anything. Isaac can feel her eyes on him, but he keeps his trained on his shoes. He scuffs a foot along the ground, and adds, "But I – I'm nothing like her. She..."

Allison was special. *She was magic*, Isaac thinks, but doesn't say.

"You're right," Lydia says. It makes Isaac look up, lungs catching in his chest. "No, let me finish. There's – There's no one like Allison. There will *never* be anyone like her. What Allison saw in you, whatever it was, whatever quality she saw that no one else could... It wasn't about her. It was about you. And the person you could be."

Isaac sighs, tears starting to fall. "I just... I just want to do right by her."

"Then do it," Lydia says, like it's that simple, like it's easy. Maybe it is. Maybe Isaac will never know exactly what Allison saw in him, maybe he'll never be able to live up to her expectations, but he can try to make her proud. He can try. Maybe that's all Allison ever wanted. She gave him a chance, and Isaac has to take it.

"And what about you?" Isaac asks.

"What do you mean?" Lydia asks again.

"How are you going to say your goodbye?" Isaac asks.

After a moment, Lydia admits, "I don't know."

"I've, um. I've lost a lot of people..." Isaac whispers. And then, he does something he never does, and he talks about Camden. "When my brother died, it felt like the world had stopped. I felt like it was supposed to be over. I was never supposed to lose him, it wasn't supposed to happen. I – I didn't know how to live in a world without him, so I didn't. I shut down. I turned numb. I stopped..."

Isaac trails off. He doesn't know what he's saying. He doesn't know what the point is. He just wants to help. He just wants all of it to mean something.

But it doesn't, not really. There's no perfect, golden connection. There's no moral to the story. There's no greater purpose. There's just loss. All around him, everywhere.

Lydia looks at Isaac, but she doesn't speak. Just watches him, just lets him think.

After a pause, Isaac says, "I don't think final moments matter all that much. I've never gotten a proper goodbye with anyone, and I... I'm doing all right."

And Lydia laughs, almost scoffs. "Yeah because *you're* the poster child of mental wellness."

"I..." Isaac has no argument. Lydia has a point. Isaac is a twisted, tangled mess. He hardly knows up from down these days. But, "I don't think it would be any better if I had time to prepare, or a proper goodbye. It'd still hurts just as bad."

"We'll never know either way," Lydia says. It's not an agreement, she's not giving Isaac her stamp of approval, but she's not denying him either. It's progress.

—

Isaac doesn't remember falling asleep, but he must have. The sun has risen, there's a crick in his neck, and Deaton is checking over Young Derek. Isaac moves to his feet with haste, stumbling as he goes.

"Is he awake?" Isaac asks.

"No," Deaton says, barely looking at Isaac.

Lydia is waking too. The braids looped across her head have come loose in the night and her voice is rough with misuse when she asks, "How's he doing?"

"His heart rate is alarmingly high," Deaton says as Lydia stands to join them.

Isaac listens for Young Derek's heart. Deaton's right. It's far too fast, hammering away in his chest. Isaac reaches for his hand again, smoothing his thumb over the back.

"He's a lot warmer now," Isaac says, though it doesn't bring him much repose.

“Isaac, I’m going to try something,” Deaton says, making intentional eye contact. “I want you to keep holding his hand, if that’s okay.”

Isaac gives a small, tentative nod. He trusts Deaton just enough to not ask questions.

Deaton picks up a scalpel. Isaac doesn’t have a chance to protest before Deaton presses it to Young Derek’s forearm. He drags it in a neat, straight line, cutting into the skin. Young Derek’s arm splits open, blood coming up to the surface. But, before Deaton has even lifted the sharp edge of the knife, the cut has mended itself back together. The wound disappears almost as quickly as it forms.

“That... looked like it healed really fast,” Lydia says on the sidelines.

“Unusually fast,” Deaton confirms.

“What does it mean?” Isaac asks. Something is happening to Derek, something more than just a change in appearance.

“I’m not sure,” Deaton says, shaking his head. “Let’s try something else. Lydia, grab me a five millimeter syringe – top drawer. Isaac, get some antiseptic – bottom cabinet.”

The three turn their backs on Young Derek, moving to retrieve the requested items. Isaac crouches down to rummage through the cabinet, grabbing the bottle of antiseptic.

There’s a heavy breath.

Isaac goes still. Very slowly, he turns and stands.

Young Derek is awake.

He’s standing beside the metal table, chin tilted to his heaving chest. His shoulders rise and fall with each labored inhale and exhale.

“Derek?” Isaac asks cautiously.

Young Derek lifts his head. There are fangs sprouted from his gums, but they aren’t bared to fight. There are clawed hands at his sides, but they aren’t poised to attack. There are bright, blue eyes staring back at Isaac, but they aren’t focused.

Isaac takes a small step forward, trying to get between Young Derek and Deaton and Lydia. He repeats, “Derek?”

Isaac's voice seems to bounce right off. Derek shows no sign of acknowledgement.

"Derek," Deaton says. "Can you hear me?"

Young Derek staggers and stumbles. He lifts clawed hands over his ears, like he's trying desperately to block them out. He's overwhelmed. They're overwhelming him. He's looking at them, but he's not seeing them.

He's not *recognizing* them.

Derek swings a claw out. It collides with Deaton's arm, the force of the impact knocking him to the ground.

Then, Young Derek runs. He flees the animal clinic, bursting right through the door.

"Isaac! Wait!" Lydia calls out, but Isaac is already on the move. He can't let Derek out of his sight. He can't lose him. He can't. He doesn't listen, he keeps going, he—

"Isaac, he's hurt!" Lydia yells, and Isaac stops. Right at the exit, he falls still.

For a split second, Isaac seriously considers taking off after Young Derek, but he can't bring himself to do it. Instead, he accepts defeat, and turns back around.

Deaton is on the ground, clutching his arm to his chest. He has a nasty scratch running down the length of his forearm, almost in the exact same place Deaton took the scalpel to Derek. Isaac wonders for just a moment whether that's coincidence, then sets into motion.

Isaac kneels next to Deaton, carefully taking his hand. Then, as the same man had taught him, Isaac takes his pain. He winces as the sharp, stinging sensation is absorbed into his skin. It's almost ticklish. The pain runs its course, taking one round trip through Isaac's body before it dissolves, fading away.

Isaac helps Deaton to his feet, moving methodically and without thought. He grabs the discarded antiseptic, a handful of cotton balls, and a roll of gauze. He might not need it anymore, but Isaac has a certain expertise when it comes to cleaning injuries.

Isaac doesn't say anything, he can't. Not yet. He just pours some of the

antiseptic onto a cotton ball, and lightly dabs it along the scratch. Deaton makes a soft noise of pain when the liquid seeps into the open wound. Isaac, using the same hand that's holding Deaton's arm steady, takes the pain as it comes.

"Call Scott," Isaac says to Lydia, who's watching him with a look of wonder. Isaac ignores it. He can't let his mind stray. He'll only send himself into a panic if he does.

Lydia does as Isaac says, though there's no answer. She tries again, but this time the phone doesn't even ring, just goes straight to voicemail. Isaac can feel his heartbeat speeding up, can feel the panic starting to creep in.

He takes a deep breath, momentarily pausing in his ministrations. *I care about you too.* His heart rate drops.

Glancing at the overhead clock, Isaac says, "They're in history right now. With Mr. Yukimura."

"I have his number for emergencies," Lydia says, sounding hesitant.

"This is an emergency," Isaac says. He can hear the emotion creeping into his tone, but he doesn't pay it any mind. He just keeps dabbing along the edges of Deaton's scratch, pulling in his pain with each subsequent press.

"Okay," Lydia says.

Isaac blocks out the rest. He finishes with the antiseptic and picks up the roll of gauze. Isaac carefully unwinds it, measuring a piece by eye and using a bit of extra strength to rip it off.

"Do you have tape?" Isaac asks Deaton, meeting the man's eyes for the first time since Young Derek ran out.

Deaton has a familiar look in eyes, the kind he gets when he's dissecting a problem, looking for clues. Isaac doesn't want that look being used on him. Isaac tries to hold firm under the gaze. He doesn't let himself wobble.

Eventually, Deaton says, "I can take it from here, Isaac. *Thank you.*"

Isaac wobbles. He can feel the current of emotion pulsing under his skin, desperate to make itself known. He can feel himself coming undone. He knows Deaton can see it, can see him unraveling.

Lydia's phone rings. The moment passes. Isaac escapes vulnerability by the skin of his teeth.

"I don't think he's just younger in body, he's younger in mind too," Deaton explains as he smooths down the last piece of tape, securing the gauze over his gash.

"He didn't recognize any of us," Lydia says, though she's looking at Isaac.

Everyone is looking at him, waiting for the moment when he snaps. Or maybe it's less mistrusting than that. Maybe they're not just looking at Isaac, maybe they're looking after him.

Isaac doesn't know. He can't be certain of anything if he can't be certain of Derek.

"He was scared," Isaac says. The feeling is mutual.

"So, if you're a teenage werewolf, and you're scared, where do you go?" Stiles asks. As always, Isaac appreciates the practicality of Stiles' approach. He never hesitates to jump head first into a mystery, not when his friends need him. Not when Isaac needs him.

"A wolf goes back to its den, but Derek lives in a loft," Scott says.

"Not when he was a teenager," Stiles says.

Isaac realizes it right away. There's only one place a younger Derek would go. Home.

Isaac can't bring himself to say it. It tugs at his heart in a way that he can't quite explain or understand. Maybe it's the fact that, while his own childhood home wasn't destroyed by a fire, it was still destroyed. Just by something else entirely. Maybe it's because home, for Derek and Isaac, was supposed to be a place they were building together.

But Derek doesn't remember.

"The Hale house," Lydia says, beating Isaac to it and breaking him out of his whirlwind thoughts.

"He wouldn't remember the fire," Isaac says softly.

"It wouldn't have happened yet," Deaton adds. The memory of his

childhood home would still be preserved, not yet marred by tragedy. Not only that, his family would still be alive. Isaac wonders: if they manage to bring Derek back to his true self, how much is this going to hurt him?

“Okay, we know where he’s going, so let’s go,” Stiles says, turning to leave. Isaac is quick to follow his lead. He’s been itching to get out of this room since Derek took off.

“Hold on,” Lydia says, bringing them to a stop. “Say you *do* manage to catch up with him? What are you going to say to him? That his whole family is dead?”

She raises a good question. They have to tread lightly with Young Derek.

Isaac turns to Scott, trusting in his discretion. Half the time, Isaac feels like he can barely hold a regular conversation. He’s certainly not equipped with the skills or social intelligence needed for one as complicated as this.

“I, uh, I guess I’m gonna have to,” Scott says, looking at Isaac throughout.

“Ohh, good luck with that,” Lydia says sarcastically, face twisting into an expression Isaac knows she picked up from Stiles. Isaac doesn’t say anything about it. Mostly because it’s not the time, but also because he doesn’t feel like dying today.

“She’s probably right, maybe you shouldn’t,” Stiles says, speaking to Scott. “You know, at least until we figure out how to get him back to normal.”

Isaac isn’t quite sure where he falls on the matter. Probably somewhere in the middle as usual. Always torn, never certain.

“I can’t lie to him,” Scott says.

“Okay, I’ll do it,” Stiles says without a moment’s pause.

“I – I don’t think any of us can. Remember, he can hear a heartbeat rising,” Scott says, addressing the entire group. “When we find him, we tell him the truth.”

“If he gets to the house first, you won’t have to,” Deaton says.

He's so calm about it, but the prospect of Young Derek finding the rubble of his home fills Isaac with stone cold dread.

They can't let Derek get there first.

Derek gets to the Hale house first, and then he gets taken in by the police because, of course, that's the next logical progression.

Isaac, Scott, and Stiles run into the station to find Sheriff Stilinski peering down at Young Derek. At their arrival, Stilinski exhales a sigh, like he should have seen this coming, and beckons them into his office.

Stilinski leans against his desk as the three boys stand before him, waiting for his reaction. Isaac is fairly sure he's the only one that's terrified, but that tends to be the way of things.

"I want you to be honest with me. Absolutely and completely honest," Stilinski says. Isaac glances at Scott and Stiles, seeing them both give nods of agreement. Isaac mirrors the movement. Then, in an almost comical twist, Stilinski asks, "Have you been time traveling?"

Completely taken by surprise, Stiles' face contorts, "Hang on, what?"

"Because if time traveling is real, you know what? I – I'm done. I'm out. You're going to be driving *me* to Eichen House," Stilinski says, arms waving in a manner far too similar to his son.

"We found him like that," Scott says, probably trying to keep the peace. It definitely doesn't have the intended effect.

"Where? Swimming in the fountain of youth?" Stilinski asks, face turning red and frustration growing. Surprisingly, Isaac doesn't feel the usual telltale signs of anxiety.

"No," Stiles says, voice level. "We found him buried in a tomb of wolfsbane in an Aztec temple in Mexico underneath a church in the middle of a town that was destroyed by an earthquake."

It's not funny – or, at least, it shouldn't be – but Isaac has to bite back a smile nonetheless. Leave it to Stiles to make him want to laugh when he feels like his world is coming apart at the seams. Isaac might be hanging by a thread, but at least the circumstances are so ridiculous it's almost humorous.

Scott doesn't seem to share in the sentiment as his eyes fall shut and his head tips forward. It's an expression of annoyance, but not anger. It's the expression of someone who is far too used to and accepting of Stiles and his rambling antics to really care anymore.

"You told me you were camping!" Stilinski exclaims in a hushed, exasperated whisper.

"Yeah, we were..." Stiles says with way too much unwarranted confidence, "In, in, it was in Mexico."

Stilinski's face screws up in irritation with an accusatory finger pointed right at Stiles. Isaac thinks the jig is up, thinks this is the moment where any remaining dregs of humor are completely wiped away.

The moment doesn't come. It's just Scott, getting them back on track, saying, "Derek's been aged backwards. He can't remember anything."

"We just need to talk to him," Stiles says, turning much more serious and sincere.

"Yeah, well, so far, he's not talking to anybody," Stilinski says, slapping his hands on his legs and returning to his perch on the edge of the desk.

Isaac wants to say that Derek would talk to him. He wants to say that they have a special connection, one that supersedes any supernatural interference. But Isaac knows that isn't true. Derek looked right at him, and he didn't even pause.

Isaac looks to his right and the answer is there.

"He'll talk to Scott," Isaac says.

The others automatically turn their attention onto Isaac as he speaks for the first time in the entire interaction.

Isaac doesn't elaborate. He doesn't know how to explain the inherent trust of an alpha like Scott to a pair of humans. He doesn't know how to explain that Scott radiates safety through more than just his chemosignals. Isaac doesn't know how to explain, so he doesn't.

Still, even without elaboration, even without the werewolf dynamics, the Stilinskis know that Isaac is right. They know all about Scott's unique powers of human connection. They understand enough to

agree.

And so, Young Derek is brought into the sheriff's office where he's left alone with Isaac, Scott, and Stiles; though, Isaac can still see Stilinski out the window, keeping a close eye on them.

Now, Young Derek sits on the couch, saying, "Why would I go anywhere with you?"

Isaac and Stiles hang back by the sheriff's desk while Scott stands closer to Derek, doing the brunt of the work. He says, "There was an accident... okay, you lost some memory, but we can help you get it back."

"How much memory?" Young Derek asks, but Isaac loses focus. There's a strong shift in chemosignals coming from his left, from Stiles.

As subtle as possible, Isaac glances over. Isaac watches Stiles closely, trying to figure out what caused his scent to turn so bitter and acrid. It's anxiety, Isaac knows. It's a familiar smell from Stiles, one that has become more and more frequent since the time of the nogitsune.

Stiles must feel the weight of Isaac's gaze because he suddenly looks up. He locks eyes with Isaac, face morphing into an indiscernible expression. There's something amiss, but that always seems to be the case with Stiles these days. So, for now, Isaac brushes it off. He turns his eyes and attention back over to Young Derek.

"You're an alpha," he's saying. Isaac combs over Derek's appearance with a little more care, taking in the details. His eyes are red rimmed and puffy, like he's been crying. Any traces of his fear are covered in anger – nice to see somethings never change – as Derek bites, "Okay, who are you? And who are they?"

"Oh, we're the guys keeping you out of jail," Stiles says without much compassion. Again, Stiles' continuity provides comfort in such an unforeseen and foreign situation, but it's still minimal at best.

"Let us help you," Scott says.

Young Derek sits back, leaning into the couch and shaking his head. "No."

This isn't going as well as Isaac hoped. He hoped Scott would swoop in and save the day – as he's so prone to doing. Isaac hoped Young

Derek would take one look at Scott and trust him. Of course, it never would be that easy. It wasn't that easy for Isaac, so why would it be for Derek?

Sure, this is a Derek who hasn't yet suffered the heartbreak and betrayal of losing his family at the hands of someone he trusted, someone he loved. But Isaac saw Derek's eyes. They were blue. This Derek isn't unmarred. This is a post-Paige Derek, a Derek who just lost his first love. (There's a lot that going around right now, it seems.)

"Okay, dude, you almost tore apart two *cops* back there," Stiles says with a little more kindness than before, though it's not much. "You need to listen to us. And that starts with no fangs, no claws, no wolf man. You got that?"

"I'm fine as long as it's not on a full moon," Young Derek says.

Oh.

It should have been obvious. First, Derek freaked out at the animal clinic, turning halfway shifted. Next, Derek lashed out at the remains of the Hale house, overcome by his anger. The evidence was all there, Isaac just couldn't see it. Isaac had considered them isolated incidents of great emotional distress, but it was more than that. Derek doesn't have control.

"You still have trouble with the full moon?" Scott asks.

"I said I'm fine," Derek says defensively. (Always so proud, too.)

There's a brief pause. Isaac wonders if he should be saying something, if he should be doing more to help. But he doesn't know how to talk to this version of Derek. Isaac is barely keeping it together right now. He can't pretend like this is normal, so it's better to keep quiet.

"All right, so you coming with us or not?" Stiles asks.

"You want me to trust you?" Young Derek asks, looking from Stiles to Scott. "Where's my family?"

Isaac's heart drops to the floor. This is it. This is Scott's opening.

Isaac doesn't want to watch. He doesn't think he can stomach it. Isaac has lost his entire family. He's been through this. He's intimately familiar with the pain Scott is about to inflict. Scott's going to speak, and he's going to do permanent, unamenable damage. He's about to

tear Derek apart, and all Isaac can do is stand there.

“There was a fire. And...” Scott says, readying the strike. He opens his mouth to speak, “They’re not here anymore. They’re fine – just had to move out of Beacon Hills. And we’re going to take you to them, as soon as we figure out how to get your memories back.”

And Scott lies.

Isaac doesn’t blame him. He wouldn’t have been able to do it either.

—

They’re waiting for Young Derek to be released, and Isaac is watching Scott. He’s leaning against the front desk, head hanging and painting the atmosphere with regret.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” Scott says, voice hushed. “I lied my ass off.”

“Hey, your ass is fine. You saved him a ton of unnecessary pain,” Stiles says, matching Scott’s volume. “We’ll figure this out in a day or two, he goes back to being old Derek, everyone’s happy. Except for Derek, who’s never happy.”

Stiles squints, nose scrunching. He flashes Isaac a look, apologetic like he’s rethinking his choice of words. That’s the thing about Stiles: he doesn’t think before he speaks. But, Isaac knows him well enough now to know he’ll think about it after. It’s where they differ. Isaac agonizes over every word before he says it, thinks too much and ends up rarely saying anything at all. Stiles, on the other hand, has no filter. He blurts words without intention, and, then, agonizes about it after the fact. It’s why Isaac can’t find himself to be upset by the statement, as ill-advised as it might have been. Instead, he gives a small shrug, communicating wordlessly that *it’s fine*. Because, truthfully, it is.

“It’s just another person that we’re lying to,” Scott says in reference to Malia and her unknown parentage. “I always feel like it’s better when we tell the truth... with Lydia, my mom, your dad.”

Deep down, Isaac knows that if they don’t figure this out, if they don’t get Derek back to normal, then Scott definitely just made a huge mistake. But admitting that means accepting the possibility that this is permanent. And Isaac isn’t ready to give up hope. He’s not ready to give up on Derek. Not yet, not ever.

And so, Isaac says, “But that’s *Derek*. He might be a kid right now, but we all remember the person the fire turned him into.”

It’s almost like Isaac has given Scott permission – like he somehow has some greater say over what happens to Derek – because Scott is quick to concur, “All right, take him to my house, and *don’t* let him out of your sight.”

Isaac has no intention of doing so. Not until this is fixed.

“And where are you going?” Stiles asks.

“I’m going to go talk to the guy we should have gone to before,” Scott says.

“Uh... Yeah! I hate that guy,” Stiles protests. Isaac catches on quickly.

Scott is already making for the exit, but Isaac calls out, “Wait, Scott, are you sure it’s a good idea to meet Peter by yourself?”

Isaac has no interest in being separated from Derek again, but he would do it. For Scott, Isaac would do it.

Scott pauses, like he’s really thinking it over. “We have no idea what this Derek is capable of if he loses control, but I know what I’m getting into with Peter. I can handle him.”

It still makes Isaac wary, but the thought of leaving Derek alone with Stiles is worse. Not because Isaac doesn’t trust Stiles or his ability to hold his own, but because Derek and Stiles alone together is never a good combination, even in the best of times. *They’re* an unknown just as much as Young Derek is.

Besides, if anything happens to Derek, Isaac wants to know with full certainty that he did everything in his power to prevent it. And that means staying close.

—

“We’re just going to wait here for Scott. We’re going to sit quietly, and we’re not going to call or talk to anyone,” Stiles says as the three of them enter the McCall house.

“Do I talk to you?” Young Derek asks, pushing Stiles’ buttons.

“No,” Stiles says.

“Fine,” Derek counters.

Stiles sighs, “Good.”

Isaac rolls his eyes. They were like this throughout the entire drive too. Isaac is so sick of them already. He can’t wait to get Derek back to normal so he never has to spend extensive time with the two of them ever again.

“And what about him? Does he talk?” Young Derek asks.

“Isaac? No, definitely not—”

“I don’t think he’s asking about me,” Isaac says, coming to a startled stop between the living room and the kitchen. Agent McCall is standing there with a big brown paper bag tucked under one arm.

(Agent McCall has been sleeping on the McCall house couch for the past couple of weeks. Isaac never really sees him, but he has a feeling Agent McCall isn’t too happy about Isaac still occupying the guest bedroom.)

Stiles comes to a screeching halt, hands flailing, “Ahh – mm! Are you getting taller?”

“What are you guys doing here?” Agent McCall asks, though the question seems to be directed more towards Stiles than anyone else. He doesn’t even look at Isaac. *Yep, definitely some animosity.*

“We’re waiting for Scott,” Young Derek says.

“Yeah, so am I. We’re supposed to have dinner,” Agent McCall says. (As if Scott owes him anything. He’s lucky Scott doesn’t still hate him.) “I brought extra. You guys hungry?”

“No,” Stiles and Isaac say at the same time Young Derek says, “Yeah!”

Stiles turns a quick glare onto Derek before saying, with a little more conviction, “No. No, we’re not hungry.”

“No, I’m starving,” Derek says, like an idiot who can’t take a hint.

Isaac can already see where this is going, and he already hates it.

“None of us are hungry. Thanks, though,” Stiles says, faking polite.

“Okay...” Agent McCall says, stretching it out. “Well, if you’re not

hungry, Stiles, your friend can still eat with us. What's your name?"

"D—"

"Miguel," Stiles says, speaking over Derek and cutting him off. "It's, uh, my cousin Miguel." Stiles slaps a hand onto Young Derek's shoulder, pulling him a little closer. It's a move that would get Stiles killed if he tried it on their Derek. "From Mexico. So..."

"¿Es usted natural de México, Miguel?" Agent McCall's voice naturally slips into the foreign language.

"Oh my god," Stiles says, completely unfiltered and devoid of emotion.

Isaac resists the urge to laugh because he knows what's coming.

"No soy native, sino que pasé un montón de tiempo allá."

Derek just so happens to be fluent in Spanish. It's another one of those little facts only Isaac knows. The thought is like salt in a wound. It pulls at Isaac's emotions, but he stamps them down. He just has to stay in the humor of it all. If he can do that, he can get through this.

And so, Isaac watches the shock take over Stiles' expression. He's completely dumbfounded.

"Fantastic," Agent McCall says, knowing he's won whatever debate they might have been having. "Egg roll?"

"Hell, yeah," Young Derek says, following Agent McCall to the dining table with a bright smile. This version of Derek smiles so easily. It's a sight to behold. It's a punch to the gut.

Stiles laughs, but it's forced and nervous. He locks eyes with Isaac, lit up with distress, like this situation got out of hand very quickly and he doesn't know what to do.

Isaac definitely doesn't want to have dinner with Agent McCall, but it might not be the worst thing in the world. It could allow them to keep Young Derek distracted and in one place long enough for Scott to talk to Peter. This won't be enjoyable, that's for sure, but it could be good.

Isaac shrugs, "Have an egg roll, Stiles."

"Have an—? Uh," Stiles stammers, falters, then, "Oh, all right. Egg roll, it is."

They sit around the dining table, eating Chinese food in stilted silence. The tension is thick in the air, though Isaac wonders if Agent McCall and Young Derek are even aware of it. Stiles certainly is. He's sitting across from Isaac, anxiety obvious despite his attempts to hide it. He's glancing back and forth between Derek and Agent McCall every few seconds, he's twirling the same noodles around his chopsticks over and over, and his knee is bouncing so hard Isaac's surprised it hasn't hit the table yet.

"So, uh, Miguel. What did you say your last name was again?" Agent McCall asks. Derek never mentioned his last name. Isaac wonders if Agent McCall is being purposefully obtuse in a ploy for information, or if he's just trying to break the heavy silence.

"Oh, it's Juarez," Stiles says before Young Derek even gets a chance to consider answering. Then, like a total dumbass, Stiles adds, "Cinqua... Tiago."

Isaac kicks him under the table, begging Stiles, for once in his life, to *please* shut up. Or, at the very least, think before he speaks.

All Isaac gets in return is an offended pout.

"That's uh... That's a mouthful," Agent McCall says, still speaking mostly to Stiles, who nods in return. He doesn't say anything else, like maybe he actually heard Isaac's warning. For just a second, Isaac thinks they're in the clear, but then, McCall is asking, "How do you spell that?"

Surely, these aren't innocent questions. He's fishing for information. The question is: which of them does Agent McCall trust less? Isaac or Stiles?

Young Derek looks at Stiles expectantly, smug and definitely not at all willing to help him.

Fortunately, Isaac doesn't mind cleaning up the messes Stiles makes. In fact, he's gotten quite good at it.

"Phonetically," he says. And, okay, maybe it's not his best work, but it does the job. Agent McCall's eyes flick over to Isaac, watching closely, assessing.

Isaac holds his gaze as he takes a bit of noodle, daring Agent McCall to question him. Isaac doesn't know why, but he's not afraid of McCall like he used to be. Not in the slightest. Maybe it's the fact that Stiles is

sitting across from him. Maybe it's the fact that Agent McCall's infuriating superiority complex has finally broken his patience. Maybe it's the fact that Isaac has been through hell, and, in comparison, this seems like nothing at all. Whatever the reason, Isaac isn't scared. He won't allow himself to be intimidated.

Agent McCall breaks eye contact.

Smirking, a little overconfident and a lot pleased with himself, Isaac turns to look at Stiles. His smirk falls into a genuine grin. Stiles smiles back.

But then, everything falls apart.

"Mr. McCall, you're an FBI agent?" Young Derek asks, noticing his badge on the table.

"He's low level. *Very* low level..." Stiles says, never one to shy away from a chance to undermine Agent McCall's authority. "He doesn't even have a voice."

"So, do you investigate murders?" Derek asks. He's aiming for casual, but Isaac knows he's building up to something. Something that won't be good. Something that Isaac would stop, if he knew how.

"Sometimes," McCall says, nodding, "when it's a Federal crime."

"What about fires?"

And there it is.

Of course, Young Derek would ask about the fire. And it hurts, the thought that this version of Derek trusts *Agent McCall* more than them, more than *Isaac*. Isaac knows he can't blame him, knows Young Derek has no reason to trust them, but still. It hurts.

And the question... The question is going to burn their lie to the ground.

"Oh my god... Y'know, I wonder where Scott is," Stiles says, interrupting and trying to change the subject. "Shouldn't Scott be here by now? We should call Scott!"

They're not listening to him. Agent McCall and Young Derek are locked in on each other, making deliberate eye contact.

Isaac doesn't know what to do.

“What kind of, um, fires are you talking about?” McCall asks.

Here it comes.

Stiles releases another nervous laugh, phone in his hand. He’s swiping through, desperately searching for Scott’s contact. And Isaac wants to kill him. Scott is his best friend. He should be an emergency contact, he should be on speed dial.

“Do you know anything about the Hale family?” Young Derek asks.

Stiles’ face screws up, like he’s bracing for impact. Isaac does the same, sucking in a breath, and hoping that what comes next isn’t as bad as he expects.

“Oh, you mean the family that was burned alive? No, I – I don’t know much. It never became a Federal case,” Agent McCall says, actually managing to exceed Isaac’s expectations.

Isaac wants to punch McCall. He wants to wring his neck. He wants to set *him* on fire.

“You!” Stiles says, pointing at Agent McCall. “You – You seriously have never once been helpful!”

And then, Young Derek is crying. He pushes up from the table, turning away and scouting his exits. His heart is pounding, he’s gasping in sobs.

Isaac wants to cry right alongside him.

—

Young Derek has Stiles pinned to the wall of Scott’s bedroom. Isaac should probably be trying to pull him off, but he can’t bring himself to move. He’s stuck in a stunned, numb trance.

“Okay, we didn’t lie! We omitted certain truths. Vital truths, now that I’m thinking about it,” Stiles says. Then, “Isaac, seriously, a little help here?”

Isaac blinks.

He steps forward, gently prying Derek off of Stiles, careful not to be any rougher than he has to. Young Derek squirms out of his hold, fighting him off, but he doesn’t lunge after Stiles again.

"I don't want to talk to you," Young Derek shouts. "I want to talk to the alpha. I'll talk to Scott."

Isaac ignores the sting.

"Okay, I'm going to go get him," Stiles says, arms held out in front of him, like he's trying to physically tamp down the explosion of emotions. He opens the door behind him with one hand, not even looking as he does it. "My phone's downstairs. Going to call him real quick. You stay here, just don't move, okay?" Then, Stiles grabs Isaac's sleeve, tugging him along. "Come on, Isaac, let's go."

Isaac doesn't want to leave Derek's side, but he doesn't fight it. He lets Stiles pull him out of the room and down the hallway, not letting go of Isaac's wrist until they're at the bottom of the stairs.

"You good?" Stiles asks, looking at Isaac with intent.

"Yeah," Isaac says, voice low and despondent. He can't stop picturing that look on Young Derek's face. It's seared into the back of his eyelids, he sees it each time he blinks. That heartache, that pain, that grief.

Stiles doesn't look like he believes him, but he doesn't get a chance to say anything because, on the dining table, his phone starts to ring. It's Scott.

"Hey, Scott, we've got a bit of a problem. Your idiot dad told Derek about the fire, and he's—"

"Kate's coming for him," Scott says. "She didn't just turn Derek back to a teenager, she turned him back before the fire. When Derek knew and trusted her. She's coming after him right now."

"No, he's totally fine, he's in your bedroom right now, Scott," Stiles says, trying to be reassuring. If it's for Isaac or Scott's sake, Isaac doesn't know. Regardless, it doesn't work.

Isaac hears footsteps upstairs. Then, a second heartbeat.

"We never should have left him alone," Isaac says under his breath, then he takes off running.

There's a woman climbing out Scott's bedroom window. Conventionally stunning, but it's her eyes that stop Isaac in his tracks. All the air leaves his lungs.

Allison. Allison's brown eyes. The way they lit up when she smiled, the way they twinkled with easy joy and even easier affection. The type of eyes that really see you.

But these brown eyes are cold and cruel.

It's Kate.

And Young Derek is gone.

Isaac kicks it into high gear, racing towards the window, but then there are hands on him. Again, Stiles is tugging Isaac back, grabbing him by the arms and shoulders. This time, Isaac fights.

Stiles' hands are grappling desperately as he pleads, "Isaac, please! Stop, stop! We have to wait for Scott, she's too dangerous, we can't--"

His voice breaks, and Isaac stills.

Stiles keeps holding Isaac's arms, like he's afraid to let go. Like if he does, Isaac will run. The fear's not unfounded.

"I know you're scared, but if we go after her now, we won't be any help," Stiles says.

"Okay," Isaac agrees. Mostly because he knows Stiles is right. Isaac is in no position to face Kate on his own. And if Isaac ran off, Stiles would follow. Stiles wouldn't let him go alone. He would try to help, and then he'd probably get hurt, and... Isaac can't risk it. He can't risk Stiles' safety for Derek's. (Derek wouldn't want him to.)

"Okay?" Stiles asks. "Okay! Okay, good!" He lets go of Isaac. "Damn, I thought you were going to be harder to convince."

Isaac shrugs, "I've never actually fought Kate, so. If you say it's not worth it, then I trust you."

"It's not that Derek isn't worth saving, it's..." Stiles sighs. "You would trade your life for Derek's in a heartbeat, and Scott would probably actually kill me if I let that happen."

"So... This is about Scott caring about me? Not you?" Isaac asks. It's meant to diffuse the tension, but all it does is make Stiles squint.

He tilts his head, looking at Isaac like he's trying to solve a puzzle. Then, something clicks. Stiles releases a small breath of laughter, head tipping to the other side. "It's a bit of both, unfortunately. Try as I

might, I just can't hate you."

Yeah, Isaac feels the same way.

—

Scott calls back after half an hour. A half hour that Isaac has spent pacing and tugging on his hair as Stiles rambles about everything and nothing, trying to distract him. It only partially works.

"Hey, Scotty, what'd you find?" Stiles answers.

"Lydia found another dead body. A gas station attendant who was brutally murdered by Kate. Lydia and Kira are at the scene right now, but Kate she – she doesn't have control. She wants to learn to control the shift, that's why she needs Derek. She's after an item called the triskelion, located in the Hale vault," Scott says, all very quick and a little all over the place.

"Wait, slow down, someone's dead? And what vault?" Stiles asks, shaking his head in confusion.

"There's a vault under the school, that's where Kate is going. Malia, Peter, and I are headed there now, but I need you and Isaac need to wait for Lydia and Kira, okay?" Scott says.

"Okay, okay, be careful," Stiles says.

"Yeah, you too," Scott says, then the line goes dead.

At once, Isaac says, "I'm not waiting."

Stiles breathes in deep, then exhales loudly, making a display of it. He even rolls his eyes in the process. "Isaac, yes you are. We're doing what Scott says, and we're waiting here for Lydia and Kira."

Isaac shakes his head. He can't stay here. They know where Derek is, they know he's with Kate. They know he's in danger, and Isaac can't sit idly by. He *has* to do something.

"No," Isaac says.

"What do you mean no? We have to trust Scott, he knows what he's doing. *We*," Stiles waves a finger between them, "do not."

Isaac huffs. His frustration is mounting, but he can't control it. In fact, Isaac doesn't feel like he can control anything right now. Derek is getting further and further away, fading into his younger self. They're

losing him. *Isaac* is losing him.

It's not pain or fear that keep Isaac human. Not anymore. Now, it's connection. It's belonging. It's Derek.

Derek is Isaac's anchor. Isaac looks at Derek, and he knows. They understand each other. They see each other. They recognize each other.

But not anymore. Now, they're like strangers again.

Without that connection, Isaac has come untethered. He's adrift through time and space. His head is spinning. He can't breathe. He's going to lose Derek.

He's already gone.

Isaac isn't going to move into the loft with Derek. He isn't going to grow and heal with Derek. He isn't going to learn the things no one else knows with Derek.

He isn't going to say goodbye.

"Isaac!" Stiles' voice breaks through the noise. Only one voice has ever done that before.

Scott. Scott's goofy smile, his endless kindness, his headstrong determination.

"Isaac?" Stiles' voice creeps through the black. A second voice, pulling Isaac from the brink.

Stiles. Stiles' even goofier smile, his endless rambles, his reluctant friendship.

Scott and Stiles.

Isaac needs Derek. He relies on him to breathe, to stay afloat, to survive. But Derek isn't all that Isaac has. Isaac lost so much, but he's not alone. He has *people*. He has Scott. He has Stiles.

He has a pack. He belongs.

Isaac opens his eyes, he doesn't know when he closed them. Stiles is standing in front of him, seeming nervous but unswayed.

There's a strong scent of blood, one Isaac recognizes as his own. He

looks down at his hands, finding his palms dripping with red. (Isaac pushes aside the memory of falling apart in an all too similar way, in the guest room down the hall with blood on his palms and a phone full of unanswered outgoing calls.)

Isaac looks up again, remembers Stiles' sensitivity to blood, and says, "Please don't faint."

Stiles actually laughs, "Oh my god. I *hate* you." A pause, then softer, "Are you okay?"

"I'm in control, yeah," Isaac says. It's not exactly the right answer, but it's all he has to offer. It's the truth, at least. And, continuing the honesty, he says, "I know we should probably listen to Scott, but I *can't* wait."

"All right," Stiles says, nodding rapidly. "But you're not going alone."

It's a predictable response. It's a *comforting* response. It's everything Isaac loves about Stiles, despite how much easier things felt when they hated each other.

And so, Stiles and Isaac climb in the Jeep and head off towards the high school.

With direction and a sense of purpose, Isaac starts to calm. Alongside the calm, comes a feeling of guilt. He definitely hasn't made Stiles' life easy today. He's been a right pain in the ass (something he's sure Stiles will hold over his head once all of this is over).

Stiles has come through for Isaac more than once this evening, so Isaac tries to do the same. He tries to even up the score. "Hey, what was with your chemosignals earlier? Back in your dad's office?"

"What?" Stiles asks, confusion genuine but eyes pointedly focused on the road ahead.

"Your chemosignals went all funny when we were talking to Derek," Isaac explains. Maybe he shouldn't have brought this up – it isn't the best time for conversation – but it's too late now.

"Dude, that is such an invasion of privacy," Stiles says, deflecting.

"I wasn't monitoring you on purpose," Isaac says. "I can't always help it, especially when the feelings are really strong. Like, say, for example, anxiety."

Stiles shoots him a quick look, staring daggers into him.

For a moment, Isaac thinks Stiles is going to ignore him completely. He's going to stop the conversation before it even starts, and Isaac will let him. He won't push. He's not trying to be nosy, he's just trying to show support.

Then, Stiles says, "Okay, fine. There was a second notice from Eichen House. My dad can't... We can't afford the bill."

"Oh," Isaac says. If he's honest, he assumed it had something to do with the lasting effects of the nogitsune. He wasn't expecting something so human. Something so mundane. (Though, Isaac supposes, *technically*, Stiles only went to Eichen because of the nogitsune. So.)

"Yeah, oh," Stiles says. "Just--"

"I won't tell anyone, if you don't want me to," Isaac says, cutting Stiles off. He knows full well Stiles was about to brush the problem under the rug, trying to convince himself and Isaac that it doesn't matter – that *he* doesn't matter. Instead, Isaac digs just a little deeper, "Honestly, I kind of get it. I mean, I don't owe anyone money in the traditional sense, but I – I've been living off of other people's generosity for months."

"You don't owe anyone anything, Isaac," Stiles says. Isaac can't tell if it's supposed to be reassuring, or if it's just an outlet for his bitterness. "Would you – Would you really not tell anyone? Not even Scott?"

"Of course," Isaac says without hesitation, surprising even himself.

"Oh," Stiles says.

"Yeah, oh," Isaac repeats.

Silence falls over the car, and Isaac's mind drifts.

He hasn't spent a lot of time thinking about money, at least, not recently. He used to, when his dad was still alive and he was living at home. Isaac had worked in his dad's cemetery, but he never saw any of the profit. He worked without pay, and it wasn't accidental. His dad trapped him in that job, robbing him of any chance at independence. He was keeping Isaac under his thumb.

Now, maybe it's time to start thinking about it again. Isaac is free

from his dad, but he still isn't independent. Not in the slightest. But, maybe, just maybe, Isaac has the power to change that now.

Isaac's mind is brought back to center when they arrive at the school.

"Wait," Stiles urges, stopping Isaac from running out of the car. Stiles twists around in his seat, reaching over the center console and under the back seat. He digs around for a moment, resurfacing with a metal baseball bat and a triumphant, "Aha!"

"Seriously?" Isaac levels Stiles with an unimpressed stare.

"Yes, seriously!" Stiles yells. "This bat has saved your life before and it will save your life again!"

And then, by some miraculous coincidence, Lydia and Kira pull into the spot next to them. The four of them quickly exit their respective vehicles, circling together and preparing to join the fight. Isaac can hear it, can hear the grunting and growling sounds of conflict.

"I can hear Scott and Malia," Isaac says in a rush.

Stiles nods on an inhale, then suggests, "You and Kira go help them, Lydia and I will look for the vault and Derek?"

Isaac nods, then, to Lydia, he says, "Don't let Stiles get himself killed using a fucking baseball bat."

"Hey!" Stiles exclaims.

Lydia smiles, "I won't."

Then, they branch off. Isaac and Kira follow the sound of fighting to the upper level balcony-hallway. That's where they slow down, bracing themselves for the strike.

There's a cacophony of bodies slamming into metal lockers and rumbling growls that don't belong to Scott or Malia. Whatever they're about to face, it's big, and, by the sounds of it, there's more than one.

"I think you should probably get your sword out," Isaac says, looking at Kira.

She nods, pulling her sword out of its sheath with a satisfying, sliding scrape. Kira holds it out ahead of her, steady and practiced. She wields it well, but Isaac still hates swords, can still see the oni's in his mind, covered in Allison's-

“You should probably get your claws out,” Kira says.

Isaac redirects his focus. He thinks of Derek, thinks of Scott, thinks of Stiles. He tilts his head down, letting the feeling of pack fill him to the brim until he can't contain it anymore and his claws pop. Hair bursts from his cheeks, fangs fall from his gums.

When Isaac looks up, his eyes are gold.

Kira meets his gaze with a flash of orangey-red, and, together, they round the last corner.

Malia and Scott are both collapsed on the ground, but that's not what captures Isaac's attention. He's much more focused on the pair of seven foot tall monsters towering over them. They're built like men, like people, but they're wearing the skulls and hides of animals. They move like predators, and grumble like bears.

Kira moves first, swinging her sword at one of the creatures. The blade collides with its armor in a dull clang. Isaac moves to attack the other, instead relying on his claws and fangs and ability to fight dirty. The things are huge and strong, but they're slow. It's the kind of fight Isaac has experience in. Ennis, the joined form of the twins, Kincaid, even Boyd – all were bigger than Isaac, but all taught him not to hold back.

And so, Isaac finds any weakness he can, and exploits it. He uses it to his advantage. The armor only covers the upper portion of the monster's chest, so Isaac aims his swipes along its abdomen and flank. He sinks his claws in deep, pulling blood to the surface without mercy.

The monster is taller than Isaac, allowing him to duck under punches and evade blows with ease. He does so again and again, using the creature's strength and momentum against itself, making it trip.

The monster wears a skull over its head, impeding on its vision. So, Isaac moves fast and swift, confusing the creature and making it harder to take aim.

All of this, all of Isaac's ability to play to his own strengths, allows him to hold his own in the fight. He does a good amount of damage while taking minimal hits to his own body.

The issue is: it's not foolproof. It's not sustainable.

This thing is much stronger than Isaac, so all it really needs to take him down is one lucky hit. And that's what happens.

In the distance, Isaac hears Young Derek's voice. It's sharp and clear as day, like he's standing right next to Isaac, saying, "I don't know, and I don't care!"

It distracts Isaac long enough for the creature to slam its sharp, dagger like claws into his chest. They dig into Isaac's pectoral, then pull down towards his stomach in a jagged, curved line. Isaac emits a noise of pain, stumbling back a step. There's a cry from Scott, a shout of, "Isaac!"

And then there's another hit. This time, a harsh shove right in the center of Isaac's chest. It sends him to the ground, landing beside Scott with a grunt. His chest heaves with shortness of breath. Each inhale tugs at his wound, pulling it apart. It makes it harder for Isaac to heal, to get up, to fight.

Isaac's head falls back, hitting the floor with a soft thunk. It tips to the side, meeting with his left shoulder and bringing Scott into view. He's propped up on one arm looking battered and bruised.

"What the hell is that thing?" Isaac says between breaths.

"Berserkers," Scott says, though he doesn't offer further explanation. Can't, really, with the way the creatures are looming over them.

Isaac forces himself up onto his elbows, trying to inch his way backwards, trying to get away. If he and Scott could get up, they could probably outrun them. That's what they should have done in the first place. But, then again, Scott never has been the type to run away from a fight.

And neither has Derek.

Young Derek comes up behind the berserkers, drawing their attention and launching an attack of his own. If he's honest, Isaac doesn't have much faith in Young Derek – he can't even fully control the shift – but, as usual, Derek proves Isaac wrong.

Derek fights with the ease and efficiency of someone who's been fighting all his life. It's second nature, like an instinct. And, then, he looks at Scott, and there's something in his eyes. Something close to recognition.

It fuels Derek. He takes on both berserkers on his own, and does so with success. He uses all parts of his body: hands, feet, head, anything he can. Isaac watches in awe, in pride, maybe even in jealousy.

One of the berserkers slams Young Derek into the lockers. He uses his hands to brace himself for the impact, grunting in annoyance. For a second, Isaac swears he sees a glimpse of the real Derek, but then he blinks, and it's gone. Isaac is ready to chalk it up to the low light of the night sky, to seeing what he wants to see, to Young Derek's obvious resemblance to his older self...

But then it happens again.

Young Derek is pushed to the ground, falling into a crouch. And when he looks up at the berserkers, his face is morphing. It transforms into a familiar gruff beard and grumpy eyebrows before turning again, jaw softening and cheeks rounding.

Derek keeps fighting and the change keeps happening.

Isaac doesn't know what's triggering it, but something is working. Derek is coming back to them. He's coming back to himself.

Isaac starts to push himself up, struggling into a seated position. His chest is still gaping open, though he can feel his body slowly knitting itself back together. (Key word: slowly.)

A shrieking, inhuman cry echoes over the grounds of Beacon Hills High School. The berserkers stop fighting. And then, like they were called away, the creatures run off.

In the wake of the fight, Scott presses up from the ground. When he's standing on his own two feet, he reaches a hand out to Isaac, who graciously accepts the help. He allows Scott to slowly and gently hoist him up, supporting some of his weight even once he's fully upright.

"Are you okay?" Scott asks, hushed and quiet. Scott's looking at him in that attentive way of his, eyes locked with Isaac's despite all the commotion around them.

"Yeah," Isaac says, just as softly. Then, with herculean effort, he tears his eyes away from Scott's.

Derek stands with his back to the group, silhouetted in the darkness of night.

Isaac takes an unsteady, nearly limping step forward. "Derek?"

This is it. The moment of truth.

Slowly, Derek turns.

With each second, more of Derek comes into view, and Isaac becomes more and more certain it's *his* Derek. First, it's just his wide, broad shoulders. Then, it's his sharp jawline and rough beard. Next, it's his eyes, lit up with recognition.

Last, it's his smile, the one reserved just for, "Isaac."

And then, his eyes light up with something more than memory. They burn gold, just for a second, before flickering back to green remembrance.

Maybe Derek's not whole yet. Maybe there's still something missing, something important, something Isaac knows Derek needs. But Derek's here, and he knows him.

Isaac staggers forward, and, in an instant, Derek is there. He's hugging Isaac and holding him upright and saying, "I'm sorry," all at once.

For a moment, they just hug. Isaac doesn't care that Scott and Kira and Malia are all watching. He just cares that Derek is here. Isaac can reach him again. Isaac bunches the material of Derek's shirt in his hand, holding tight to the tangible warmth of *real, real, real*.

And then, Isaac pulls away. He stays close, stopping just far enough to swat, push, shove at Derek's shoulder. "That's twice, Derek. Disappear on me again, and I swear—"

"You'll kill me yourself?" Derek asks, the hint of a smile creeping in. "C'mon, Isaac, you need to get more creative with your threats."

Isaac grins, doesn't even try to hold it back. "I was gonna say I'll rip your throat out with my teeth, but yours works too."

—

The bed frame finally gets unboxed and assembled.

They set Isaac up in the room at the top of the spiral staircase, at Derek's insistence. He said Isaac deserved his own space and privacy, and wouldn't hear any different.

Though, actually getting the mattress up the stairs is a different story altogether. It's one full of Derek cursing and groaning about how he "survived being aged backward but is going to be defeated by a set of

stairs.” Meanwhile, Isaac is laughing his ass off in the corner and definitely not recording a video. (Any of Derek’s anger is undermined by the smile he can’t quite fight and the domesticity of it all.)

Eventually, the mattress made its way up the stairs, and now it’s nestled on the bed frame. Two pieces of a puzzle.

Derek has left Isaac alone for a bit, giving him a chance to acclimate to the space, to get comfortable. And Isaac is. He’s so comfortable.

He doesn’t have much to unpack, honestly. It’s kind of jarring to suddenly have a space of his own, a space he can fill with whatever he wants. It’s a shock of freedom, one Isaac is definitely going to have to spend some time getting used to.

For now, he just packs away his clothes, organizing them in the small closet and chest of drawers until there’s only one item left.

Nestled inside his duffel bag, wrapped up in an old, worn t-shirt, is Allison’s ring dagger. Isaac carefully unfolds the fabric, setting it aside and cradling the knife in his hands. Like it’s something delicate, like it’s something fragile, like it hasn’t been pierced into his skin twenty times before.

Isaac places the dagger on his bedside table. He’s keeping it close, keeping Allison close.

Isaac flops down on the mattress, ignoring the metaphors swirling in his mind. He doesn’t need to compare his journey moving into the loft to that of this mattress. Because it doesn’t matter. He’s here now.

The sun has set over Beacon Hills, and Isaac is here. In *his* room. It isn’t very big or exciting, and it’s full of books Derek promises to relocate, but it’s his. It’s home.

Isaac stares up at the ceiling, feeling content for the first time in a long time.

As happy as Isaac is, there’s a lot he’s going to have to get used to here, even more than just the shock of freedom. The biggest being the absence of the McCalls. Isaac certainly won’t miss living with Agent McCall, but he will miss Scott and Melissa.

This is usually the time of day where Isaac and Scott would be together, speaking about the day’s events and just spending time in each other’s presence. It’s strange how much Isaac misses it. He saw

Scott only hours before, but he misses him.

And then, Isaac remembers the existence of modern technology. He's too happy right now to overthink it or hold himself back, so he picks up the phone, and he calls. He takes the jump.

"Hello?" Scott answers.

"Hey, Scott," Isaac says, still staring at the ceiling.

"Why're you calling? I thought you would be busy moving in," Scott says. Then, *"Did you ever get the mattress up the stairs?"*

Isaac laughs, can't help himself. The image of Derek looking ready to rip that mattress to shreds is one that's going to make him smile for a long time, maybe even forever. "Yeah, yeah, we did," Isaac says on an exhale. He can hear how happy he is. "I finished unpacking a little while ago, it just... it felt weird not seeing you."

"Yeah, it felt weird for me too. You were never very loud, but it still feels too quiet," Scott says.

It's nice hearing that Scott is missing him too, even if he doesn't say it in those exact words. They had settled into a routine living together, and, despite Isaac having zero regrets or second thoughts about his decision, it's still a little bittersweet to have to let that go.

Though, maybe, he doesn't have to let it go entirely. Maybe, they can form a new routine.

"So," Scott says, *"tell me about the loft. What's your room like? I've always wondered what was up those stairs."*

Chapter End Notes

(I love this chapter)

Muted

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 4 episode 3

Word count: 7,755

It's been a week since the Hale vault was robbed and Derek was turned back to his normal age. It's been four days since Isaac moved in with Derek. It's been nice, apart from how often Peter has been hanging around. He's obsessed with getting his money back and catching the culprit. Derek, on the other hand, only cares about what was stolen from him. The color of his eyes.

Regardless, both parties have come up empty handed in their search for Kate. So, that's why Braeden is here.

Isaac, unsurprisingly, has no interest in Peter's money problems, but he is interested in figuring out what happened to Derek. So, that's why Isaac is here. He lingers in the background, sitting on a stool at the window and watching as Braeden slams her boots down on the coffee table.

"That table's Italian," Peter says. (It's also not his table.)

"So are these boots," Braeden retorts. Isaac might not have properly known Braeden before – still doesn't, really – but he's very quickly growing to like her. Derek is too, if his subtle smile is anything to go by. "Are we going to talk interior design and fashion or are we going to talk numbers?"

Peter sighs, but Isaac isn't paying attention to him. He's focused on Derek, on the way he's holding his sunglasses and looking at his reflection in the lenses. Isaac can't fully understand the scope of what Derek has lost, not when his own eyes are still rightfully gold. But Isaac knows it's important, knows it's a symbol of what Derek has gone through, of what he's had to do. Without it, Derek feels like he's lost a piece of who he is.

That Isaac can empathize with.

Peter scribbles on a piece of paper, sliding his offer across the *Italian* table. Braeden takes one look at it, picks up the pen, and writes down

her own number. She passes the paper to Peter. She leans back in her seat, hands folded in her lap. She's a little smug and not at all nervous.

"We're hiring you to find Kate, not assassinate the president," Peter says.

"I was hired by the Calaveras to find Kate. You're hiring me to find her first," Braeden says, looking between the two Hales. Her eyes land on Peter, when she adds, "Going against the Calaveras is what's going to cost you."

Peter exhales, writing down another number like it actually pains him to do so. Braeden doesn't even look at it, just slides it right back. It makes Peter huff and flounder, scoffing as he dramatically walks away.

Yeah, Isaac definitely likes her.

Derek grabs the scrap of paper. He doesn't look at it either, just tears it in half and balls it up in his hand. With intent, he says, "We'll pay." Peter swirls back around, but Derek, with the practiced ease of a nephew, ignores him. "Just find Kate, that's all we want."

And so, Braeden agrees and Peter shows her to the door. He slams it shut with unnecessary force and flourish. He stands with his hands on his hips, a little red in the face. He bellows, "Are you insane?"

Isaac almost starts to laugh, but holds it in when Derek fixes him with a pointed glare.

"We don't have a choice," Derek says, solemn. "We spent a week looking for her and came up with nothing."

Derek's been like this a lot over the past week, quiet and despondent. Isaac wants to fix it, wants to make it better, but he knows he can't. Derek was put through the wringer. He was returned to his teenage self. He was forced to relive the moment he found out his entire family died. He was confronted by his abusive and murderous ex. That's not something someone can just bounce right back from.

"If we don't find out who told Kate about the vault, we don't get those bonds back," Peter says, slowly approaching. Isaac sits up a little straighter, hackles rising. "What do you think I'm gonna do then, huh? Get a job? My resume is slightly out of date." Peter stops just behind Derek's back. "We got *robbed*, Derek. Robbed!"

Peter grabs Derek's shoulder, like he's going to force him to turn around and face him. Derek isn't having it. He grabs Peter's wrist, hard enough Isaac swears he hears bones crunching, though the sound is drowned out by Derek's roar. He growls in Peter's face, fangs out and eyes glowing.

They're still gold.

"Oh, that's a new look for you," Peter says, staring at Derek with something akin to anxiety.

Derek roughly pulls his arm away, fangs receding and eyes dull, but it's too late. The secret is out.

"What happened to your eyes?" Peter asks.

"I don't know," Derek says, intensity rising, "but I'm willing to pay to find out."

—

Isaac is halfway out the door, backpack and lacrosse bag balanced on his shoulders, when Derek asks, "Where are you going?"

Isaac stops in his tracks, eyebrows furrowed in slight confusion. "Uh. Lacrosse starts up again today. We have practice and tryouts before and after school."

"Okay, I'll drive you," Derek says, getting up from the couch.

Isaac stands there, mouth parted open. "You're... You're gonna drive me to school?"

"Yes," Derek says, like it isn't a big deal. (It definitely is.) "I told you, we're doing this right this time, so that means no more walking fifteen minutes to a bus stop just to get to school. I'm driving you."

"You are so embarrassing," Isaac groans, but he doesn't mean it. In fact, he's pretty sure he's smiling like an idiot.

"I'm cool and you know it," Derek says, leading the way out of the loft.

Isaac breaks out of his stupor, following after him, saying, "No, that's just a facade. Deep down you're just as lame as the rest of us."

Derek doesn't warrant that with a response, but he does take care to

lock up the loft. The updated security system was one of Isaac's conditions for moving in. (He only had two: don't kick me out and get a functioning lock for the door. Predictably, it was the latter that caused more of an uproar from Derek.)

And so, Derek drops Isaac off at school, promising to be back after practice. It's a little weird how easy it is to act like this with Derek, like they're an actual family. Even with the negativity swirling around them – Kate, Derek's eyes, Allison – they've fallen into a rhythm so easily. It warms Isaac up inside.

Then, Isaac meets with Scott and Stiles as they make their way onto the lacrosse field.

"Of course you're still the team captain," Stiles is saying. "You got your grades up just like Coach told you to, right?"

Despite everything else going on, Scott has been making every effort to boost his GPA. Isaac knows because he's been helping Scott study for history and English while Scott helps him with chemistry and precalculus. Neither of them need help in econ, but Isaac ignores that thought.

"Yeah," Scott says, "but he never told me I was back on the team. He just told me to show up at tryouts today."

"We got bigger things to deal with anyway," Stiles says. "Did you tell Argent yet?"

Argent is still in France, but, after Kate's return from the grave, he needs to be contacted. He deserves to know the truth, even if it is a terrible one.

"Uhh, I texted him, but he didn't get back to me," Scott says.

Stiles pauses. "You told him his sister Kate came back from the dead over text?"

"Scott, even *I* know that was a terrible idea," Isaac says incredulously.

Scott shrugs, turning sheepish, "I didn't have the money to call France."

"Yeah, you think you got money problems? Try paying for an MRI and a visit to Eichen House," Stiles says. (So he *did* decide to tell Scott about his financial struggles. It's a good thing, Isaac thinks.)

“Another notice?” Scott asks.

“Yeah, this one said ‘final’,” Stiles says with a sigh. Then, turning to Isaac, “How’s Derek and the loft? I still can’t believe you’re willingly living with Sourwolf.”

Isaac doesn’t bother coming to Derek’s defense. He knows Stiles’ words are intended to be lighthearted. Stiles might not fully understand Isaac and Derek’s connection and dynamic, but he does understand how important the relationship is to Isaac. So, even though Stiles’ personal opinion of Derek hasn’t changed, he’s not trying to project that onto Isaac.

Still, Isaac says, “Derek is... He’s – He’s struggling a bit with the whole ‘ex-girlfriend who killed his family coming back from the dead and temporarily turning him into a teenager’ thing, but, you know, other than that. The loft is great.”

“All right, seriously, what am I supposed to say to that?” Stiles says, fully exasperated. “I mean, what the hell are we even doing here anyway? We got like a hundred and seventeen *million* problems, and worrying about our status on the lacrosse team is not one of them.”

Scott’s expression shifts, eyes turning wide and attention focused beyond Stiles’ shoulder. He says, “It is now.”

Isaac follows Scott’s gaze. There, stationed in the goal, is an unknown player. A player who is catching every single ball. They watch him block at least seven shots. Not only that, he does it with ease. It’s effortless.

“Who the hell is that?” Stiles asks.

The player steps out of goal, one-handedly lifting his helmet. It’s not a very dramatic reveal considering Isaac still doesn’t recognize the kid, but he’s definitely younger. A sophomore, by the looks of it.

He’s good. And, if his smirk is any indication, he knows it.

“Okay, maybe we should just practice a little bit,” Stiles says, stunned.

The three of them head out onto the field, though they remain distracted. The majority of the time, their attention stays glued to the new kid. And they aren’t the only ones noticing him. The other players are clapping hands on his shoulders and praising his efforts. His performance is near perfect, definitely deserving of the

recognition, but that does nothing to assuage the feeling of unease.

He's almost too good. Suspicions start to grow.

And so, back in the locker room, after changing out of their practice gear, they corner Liam. He's pulling on a t-shirt when they approach. Stiles, maybe not so wisely, leads the charge.

"Hey, Liam," he greets. "You want to explain what that was back there?"

"What do you mean?" Liam asks, glancing around nervously.

Maybe, as three upperclassmen, they should have given a little more thought to ambushing a sophomore, but it's too late to back off now.

"That little display. Your little circus act," Stiles says, voice accusatory.

"What circus act?" Liam asks, a little less nervous, but definitely still confused.

"You caught every shot," Stiles says, hands gesturing as if his implications are obvious. They definitely aren't. Stiles is terrible at this.

"I was in goal..." Liam says, looking from Stiles to Scott to Isaac. Isaac has the decency to flash him an awkward, aiming for apologetic, grimace.

"Yeah, but *nothing*, not a single shot got past you," Stiles says. He's got his finger out now, pointing at Liam like he's done something wrong and he should know it.

This is going so badly.

"Yeah, I was the goalie," Liam says. He looks at the three of them, laughter infusing his words, "You guys played this game before?"

There's a small pause, then Scott asks, "You're a sophomore, right?"

"Yeah," Liam says, nonchalance forced.

"But you weren't here last semester," Stiles says. It's still more accusation than question.

The kid shrugs. "Transferred from Devenford Prep."

Scott tilts his head. It's a slight, barely there movement. He's angling his ear just right, so he can hear every beat of Liam's heart, so he can hear the falsities in the arrhythmia. Isaac listens too, as Scott confirms, "You transferred?"

Liam's heartbeat rises. He lies, "Yeah."

With all of his usual subtlety, Scott says, "No. You got kicked out, didn't you?"

For a moment, Liam's eyes turn heated. His emotions shift, cycling through anger and confusion and maybe even betrayal. Then, it passes. He covers the negativity with a laugh, going for casual. "All right, look – kicked out or transferred, what do you guys care? I came here to play lacrosse!" He pauses, and then, less angry and more genuine, he asks, "The team could use a few good players, right?"

"No!" Stiles says at once. "No, we don't need any more good players."

Stiles is a liar. The fact that he's on the team, occasionally even plays first line, is proof enough. They definitely don't need a new captain, but they *could* use some skilled players.

Isaac has no qualms about telling Stiles he's wrong, so he does just that. "We kind of suck, Stiles."

"Okay, no, *you* kind of suck–"

"Actually, we could sort of use a couple," Scott admits, interrupting whatever bickering was about to occur.

"All right, how'd you get this good?" Stiles asks, energy turning focused, less manic. "Have you always been this good? Or did it suddenly happen just once overnight? Have you ever been out in the middle of the woods during the night of–"

Between Scott and Stiles, it's a wonder the whole world doesn't know about the supernatural. Fortunately, they have Isaac to censor them.

So, Isaac elbows Stiles in the ribs. It's not meant to be harsh, and it definitely isn't painful. Though with the way Stiles reacts, you would think Isaac stabbed him. He lets out an overly dramatic, "Ahh!" and clutches his side. Then, he takes aim at Isaac's shin, trying to kick him. With quick reflexes, Isaac pulls his leg out of the way, and Stiles quite nearly falls on his ass.

“Guys!” Scott exclaims, impatience plain as day.

Isaac avoids eye contact, looking up and away at the ceiling, lips sealed shut to keep from laughing. He takes a deep breath, reigning in his amusement and pulling himself back together.

“Look, I learned from my stepfather, all right?” Liam says to Stiles. Then, he turns to Scott, continuing, “He made team captain when he was sophomore. Like you.”

A small, pleased smile crosses Scott’s features.

“And yeah,” Liam says, taking his items out of his locker and speaking to Stiles once more. “I guess I’m just that good.”

Liam swings his backpack onto his shoulder, and walks away. Scott is still smiling when he says, “He wasn’t lying that time.”

—

Despite the delay in the locker room, Isaac is still one of the first students to arrive in the art classroom. He minds his own business, taking up an easel along the outer wall and waiting for class to begin.

Lydia walks in the door, and Isaac’s eyes immediately turn to watch her. Lydia has a unique magnetism. She draws you in, pulling your attention, making you see what she wants you to see. (It’s why Isaac asked her out that one time, though he tries not to think about it. It was horribly misguided and makes Isaac feel a little sick with embarrassment.)

So, head held high as always and carrying with her that air of confidence, Lydia marches into the room, and then straight towards Isaac. She doesn’t even hesitate before falling into the seat beside him.

“Good morning, Isaac,” she says like this is normal. It’s definitely not. They’ve never sat together before. They’ve only ever had a handful of one-on-one conversations. This is completely unexpected, and yet, Isaac doesn’t feel awkward.

“Hey, Lydia,” he says. It sounds natural. It sounds easy.

It sounds normal, though none of this is. Lydia Martin and Isaac Lahey aren’t friends. They don’t sit in class together. They’re just two people with a mutual group of friends.

They're just two people when they are supposed to be three.

Allison is supposed to be here. She's supposed to be in this class with them. Her unfinished artwork is probably stored somewhere in this very room.

She's supposed to be here.

She's not here, but Lydia Martin and Isaac Lahey are. So, they'll sit together. They'll act like this is normal, like they aren't aching with the loss. They'll sit together, and maybe, just maybe, one day, they'll be friends too.

—

Isaac and Lydia walk to precalculus together.

Isaac sort of expected Lydia to ditch him as soon as they left the art classroom. He assumed they're closeness was conditional, existing only because of the space and circumstance. But, Lydia waits for Isaac at the door, and then they walk the hallways together in companionable silence. It's strange, but not unwelcome.

And then, even stranger, they sit together again. They still don't talk, but Isaac sits behind Lydia as she busies herself with the textbook.

Stiles and Malia are the next to enter the classroom. Stiles has to steer Malia inside, saying, "It's school. School is important, and math is essential."

"To what?" Malia asks.

"Knowing how much to tip at restaurants," Stiles says, voice hushed and conspiratorial.

Isaac rolls his eyes. He doesn't particularly like math, and he's not very good at it, but he knows full well math is more important than that. Isaac opens his mouth to counter, but Lydia beats him to it, "And other less important things like medicine, economics, engineering..."

"Tipping," Stiles repeats, undeterred.

Then, Ms. Fleming speaks, bringing the class to a start, "All right, volunteers to the board. Lydia, Diego, Malia."

Isaac watches Malia go wide-eyed and startled. "Um... I didn't volunteer."

“You did now,” Ms. Fleming says without leniency. “To the board.”

Malia looks back at Stiles with an almost murderous glint her eyes. Stiles flashes her an overly enthusiastic smile and two thumbs up. Although, both quickly fall away as Malia growls. It’s quiet, enough so that no one else hears, but, seriously, the subtlety of this pack is horrific.

Malia gets up and goes to the board despite her desire not to. Stiles slumps in his seat, turning just a bit stricken and definitely concerned. He looks at Isaac, almost pleadingly.

Isaac bites down on a laugh, but he can’t hold back the muttered, “Don’t look at me! She’s your girlfriend.”

“Okay, but, I–” Stiles huffs. Whatever defense he had queued up is interrupted by the sound of his phone buzzing. He fumbles to get it out of his pocket, face twisting into an awkward sort of frown as he looks around the room, ensuring that no one is paying attention to them.

Then, he opens his phone and his expression drops.

Stiles holds his phone out for Isaac to see, and, there, in bold typeface, are the words: **BEACON LEDGER NEWS ALERT: TRIPLE HOMICIDE, DEVELOPING...**

Stiles opens the article, finding information about a gruesome murder. The killer, wielding an axe as his weapon, targeted and decimated a family. (There was only one survivor, a teenage boy left dealing with the loss of his entire family. Isaac really hopes Derek doesn’t keep up with the local news.)

The story is definitely concerning and a little heart wrenching, but it’s not the worst thing in the world.

Though, someone should probably tell Stiles that. Isaac spends the next hour watching his knee jump and his fingers tap. Isaac doesn’t tell him to stop, doesn’t really mind the fidgeting, but it does set him on edge. Enough so that, when the bell rings, he’s quick to follow Stiles out of the classroom and into the hallway.

They easily track down Scott and Kira, quickly informing them of what they discovered during another run of the mill math lesson.

“An axe murderer?” Kira asks. It’s more rhetorical than anything, just

an expression of her confusion and worry.

“A family-murdering axe murderer,” Stiles confirms.

“I... already heard about it,” Scott says slowly. He looks at Isaac, and there’s a hint of regret in his eyes. Isaac doesn’t understand why.

Then, Stiles opens his mouth, and Isaac gets it. Stiles doesn’t miss a beat, “Wait, what? You did? How?”

“My mom called me. She knew we’d see it on the news,” Scott explains, stopping at his locker.

“Perfect! Let’s go!” Stiles says, already turning towards the school exit.

“Whoa, whoa. We’ve got econ in five minutes,” Scott says, starting to insert his locker combination and definitely not matching Stiles’ frantic energy.

Stiles stills, looking at Scott like he’s sprouted a second head. “All right, did you forget the part about the family-murdering axe murderer?”

“Did you forget that your dad’s the sheriff?” Scott asks. Then, “They want us to stay out of it.” He’s not being cruel or unkind, he just doesn’t feel the same urgency. Scott’s unfazed, unworried.

“Are you guys kidding me?” Stiles asks, looking between Scott and Kira. “There – There’s a family-murdering axe murderer, and we’re not going to do anything about it?”

“Maybe we should let the adults handle it,” Kira says, lightening the blow with an apologetic smile.

Stiles’ face contorts like he truly can’t believe what he’s hearing. He looks at Scott, trying to appeal to him, but gets nothing in return. The energy, the motivation, the fight has drained from his voice when he says, “So, the two of you, want to stay here, school, go to class.”

All Scott manages is a quiet, “Uh.”

“Never heard anything so irresponsible in my entire life,” Stiles says, then he rounds on Isaac. “And what about you?”

Isaac pales. He understands why Stiles is worried, knows why he wants to be involved, but any of the anxiety Isaac was sharing has drained in Scott’s presence. Scott’s calm has rubbed off on him. It’s

easy to follow Scott's lead. Under his influence, Isaac has been placated.

Isaac doesn't say anything, but he doesn't have to. Stiles points an angry finger at him, "*You*, you are the worst! Honestly. So predictable!"

Isaac sucks a breath in through his teeth, not feeling sorry, but definitely feeling something. Stiles just shoots him a dirty look, and turns to stomp away.

Scott calls after him, "See you at tryouts?"

Stiles gives a little wave of his arms, still not looking back. Isaac watches him go, hoping that, for once, Stiles' intuition is wrong and the axe murderer is nothing more than a human evil.

When Stiles is gone, Scott looks over at Isaac, expression twisted into something that plainly means, *oops*?

—

"Wait, Isaac, are you still taking the bus back to the loft?" Scott asks. They're in the locker room now, getting ready for lacrosse tryouts. (Stiles has since calmed down about the axe murderer, accepting defeat without too much of a protest.)

"Uh, no," Isaac says, being purposely vague. He focuses on tightening his pads and trying to avoid the subject.

"Then how are you getting there?" Scott asks. He's genuinely just curious. He wants to know. He wants to be involved, to engage Isaac. It's purely innocent.

The way Stiles is watching Isaac is decidedly not innocent.

Isaac sighs, biting the bullet, "Derek is picking me up."

Stiles immediately starts to laugh, "Ohmygod. Oh my god! Derek is picking you up? From school? Oh, I have to see this!"

"Stiles," Scott scolds, but Isaac doesn't really mind. His face is definitely a bit red, and it is a little embarrassing, but it's not cruel. Stiles doesn't have cruelty within him. Never has, and never will.

"Oh, what? Come on! You can't tell me it isn't at least a little funny!" Stiles exclaims. He looks lit up with humor, like this is the best thing

he's ever heard. His joy might be worth Isaac's suffering.

"What did you have to do to convince Derek?" Stiles asks.

Isaac goes quiet, mumbles, "It wasn't my idea."

"Oh-ho! This just keeps getting better. Does he pack your lunch too?" Stiles jabs, teasing a little more ruthlessly.

Isaac takes it back. His suffering is definitely not worth Stiles' joy. (Even if the teasing does bring Isaac a unique feeling of belonging. The kind that only comes from being so comfortable with someone that there's no doubt where their intentions lie. The kind of closeness where the teasing can be incessant, but all it brings is laughter. Isaac feels so... *known*.)

"No, I – shut up!" Isaac responds eloquently.

Coach's whistle blows, saving Isaac from any further embarrassment.

Isaac turns to Coach, but he can't shake the feeling of eyes on him. The weight of the gaze is tickling at his skin, making him want to itch and squirm.

He doesn't. Instead, he follows the feeling, looking to his left. It's Scott. Of course, it is. He's watching Isaac with a small smile. It's fond, and makes the urge to twitch even worse.

He doesn't. Instead, Isaac whispers, "What?"

Scott shakes his head, mouths with barely any volume, "Nothing."

Isaac's eyebrows furrow, but then Coach is launching into his announcement, drawing Isaac's attention. "As a reminder, it's an open tryout today. All positions available."

The feeling of being watched still doesn't go away. This time, it's Stiles. He's squinting at Isaac, looking between him and Scott.

Isaac, in all his emotional maturity, flips Stiles off.

"This is a rebuilding season, people!" Coach says, again bringing Isaac back to focus. "Jackson's gone, Danny's gone. Greenberg, the one guy I actually wanted gone... was held back. Again." Then, "Get your asses on the field!"

Isaac grabs his gear, ready to leave the locker room, but he hangs back

when he sees Scott approaching Coach. Isaac makes himself look busy, fiddling with the strings of his stick.

“Hey, Coach? I just wanted to ask if... I was still... If I’m... you know...”

“You’re on the team, McCall,” Coach answers without his usual animation, putting Scott out of his misery.

Coach turns to enter his office, but Scott isn’t done. He continues to stammer, “But am I... e-everything that I was... on the team... before?”

Coach pivots, tapping Scott’s shoulder, and giving a quiet, “All positions are open.”

Isaac watches Scott fall flat. His breath leaves his lungs and the light in his eyes fades. Isaac seizes the moment and joins him. He angles his head towards the locker room exit, gesturing for Scott to, “Come on. You’re a great player and a better captain. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

Scott nods, though he’s lacking enthusiasm. “Yeah. Thanks.”

Stiles slides up to them, and they head out to the field together. Tryouts begin.

They start with laps around the field. Isaac is fast, always has been, even before the bite. It’s equal parts long legs, above average height, and lung capacity. Isaac doesn’t think about where that lung capacity might have come from, just uses it. It’s not hard to keep up with the group, though he isn’t the one leading the herd.

It’s Liam.

Isaac could easily outrun him, but he has no interest in showing off, so instead he runs alongside the others. He sticks to the middle of the group, only a little bit faster than Scott, but eons ahead of Stiles.

Stiles, predictably, finishes last. Isaac honestly doesn’t know how Stiles continues to make the team, though he has a sneaking suspicion it has to do with a not-so-secret favoritism.

“Okay, come here, buddy,” Scott says, helping Stiles up after he collapses on the field in an unnecessary show of dramatics. “I got ya.”

“Who came in first?” Stiles says, breathless.

Scott nods towards the center of the field, pointing out Liam. He’s among the other hopeful teenagers, but, unlike the others, he isn’t stretching mildly. He’s doing steady pushups, one after the other. It’s a little bit irksome, and definitely sort of cocky, but there’s something about Liam. He reminds Isaac of Jackson, though without the unending arrogance and merciless cold.

It’s like he has something to prove.

“Is he even human? What is he? Like a were-cheetah? Does that even exist? Is that a thing?” Stiles says, panting for breath.

“I think he’s just that good,” Scott says, and, honestly, Isaac agrees. Liam might be their team’s first *good* lacrosse player who isn’t relying on supernatural abilities. It might not be such a bad thing.

Coach continues to run them through drills. Isaac can’t help but notice that Scott is holding back. He’s keeping his powers locked away, refusing to tap into them. It leaves Scott fumbling and struggling, confidence shaken. He’s underperforming, and it’s obvious to everyone.

Unlike Scott, Isaac’s werewolf powers have only ever honed his practiced skills. Before the bite, Isaac was a sufficient lacrosse player. He didn’t need the help of super-strength or super-speed. All Isaac really needed was a little bit of self-esteem, a little bit of power. Now, he has that.

Scott didn’t have much proficiency in lacrosse before the bite, and, now, he’s paying for it. He’s prioritizing his morals, his desire to play fair, and it might cost him the title of captain.

Meanwhile, Liam is continuing to dominate.

“Maybe he’s only good in goal. You know, just totally useless on the rest of the field,” Stiles says as they watch Liam prepare to take his shot.

Liam winds his stick back, and, then, he launches the ball forward. It soars through the air, right past the goalie, hitting the net and earning a triumphant shout of, “Yes!” from Coach.

“Maybe he’s just perfect everything,” Stiles grumbles. “I *hate* this kid.”

“You don’t *have* to hate him,” Scott says, though he sounds reluctant. “The team needs new players.”

“What about a new team captain?” Stiles asks.

Scott’s head whips to Stiles, eyebrows raising at the statement. He’s a mixture of shock and hurt. More slowly, he looks back at Liam, eyes narrowing as he zones in on his threat.

Scott takes a deep breath and pushes forward to take his shot. For a moment, Isaac thinks the tide is going to turn. Scott seems more focused, more determined, but then, the ball hits the orange metal of the goal with a resounding *clink!*

Scott falls back a step, ego bruised.

There’s a chorus of laughter, topped off with a sarcastic call of, “Nice, McCall!”

“Hey, Garrett...” Stiles yells back, and, with a wag of his eyebrows, “Shut up!”

Garrett only smiles. Isaac sort of wants to punch him, but he forces himself not to. Instead, Isaac lines up to take his own shot. Scott might be out of sorts and faltering, but Isaac isn’t.

Intending to actually shut Garrett and the others up, Isaac takes aim. He hurls the ball, catapulting it through the air and into the back of the net with a satisfying swish.

Isaac turns around, flashing Garrett a smug smirk.

“Okay, see, Scott, why can’t you be like Isaac and put your powers to good use?” Stiles asks, hands flailing.

Isaac probably shouldn’t say it, but he does anyway. “I wasn’t using my powers.” Stiles’ mouth drops open and Scott’s head dips to the side. Isaac shrugs, still smirking, “I guess I’m just that good too.”

Isaac’s show of talent doesn’t have the desired effect. It does shut Garrett up, but it doesn’t help Scott. The drills continue on in the same pattern: Liam making every shot, and Scott missing every one.

It’s a disaster, honestly.

It only gets worse when Coach puts Scott and Stiles in goal together for two-on-ones. As expected, they perform terribly. Every single shot

gets past them, and Scott is turning more and more miserable.

Isaac knows Scott is a better player than this. Even without his powers, Scott has improved in leaps and strides since they were sophomores. He isn't reliant on super-strength or super-speed, he's just good. Isaac knows that. He knows Scott can do this.

Scott just needs a reminder.

When Isaac walks up to take his next shot, he knows what he's going to do. He's done well enough throughout tryouts that he has no reason to worry about securing his position on the team. And he has no interest in being captain either. Not when they have a perfectly good one in Scott.

So, Isaac pulls back. He purposely fumbles his shot, allowing Scott to easily snag the ball in the pocket of his stick.

Scott's face lights up, and it's totally worth the failure.

After that, Scott starts to do better. He regains his self-confidence, and gets his head in the game. Isaac's single missed shot gives Scott a little taste of victory. It's all the boost he needs.

Eventually, it's Liam's turn against Scott and Stiles. The tension is building, everything leading up to this moment. Scott and Stiles stand firm and ready. Liam cradles the ball and runs forward. Stiles dives at Liam, but he's out maneuvered by the sophomore. Scott swings his stick, but Liam ducks under it. He fires and...

Liam scores.

Disappointment lurches in Isaac's stomach. It seems he's not the only one feeling it. From the stands, Malia shouts, "That was luck!"

"Oh, no, Malia, don't get involved," Stiles murmurs, but it's too late.

"Do-over!" Malia yells, hands cupped around her mouth.

"Sweetheart, there's no do-overs. This is a practice," Coach says, chuckling.

Malia doesn't back down. "Ten bucks on Scott and Stiles."

There's no universe in which this goes well, but there's nothing Isaac can do to stop it. It's already in motion. The wave is already cresting.

“I’ll take that action,” Coach says without hesitation. Then, yells, “Hey! Get back in there, Liam.”

Just like that, the tension comes back ten-fold. Isaac can feel it all around them. He can *smell* it, stirring in with the scent of sweat and grass. There’s anticipation holding tight to Isaac’s lungs, he squeezes his own stick tight, holding his breath.

Liam sprints forward, and Isaac swears he hears Scott’s familiar growl. Again, Liam evades Stiles with ease, but it isn’t the same story with Scott. Liam and Scott collide. Liam goes over Scott’s shoulder, and, for a moment, he’s suspended in the air.

Then the wave hits the shore. Liam’s body hits the ground. Bone snaps.

Isaac stops holding his breath, springing to action. He runs over, joining Scott and Stiles in standing over Liam. He’s squirming on the ground, turning over onto his knees and grunting as he does.

“Do not move!” Coach shouts, running over. “Don’t touch him.”

Scott and Stiles hold up their hands, taking a step back.

“I’m okay, Coach. I’m all right,” Liam says, but his words are immediately undermined when he moves to stand, crying out in pain. He falls into Scott and Stiles’ waiting arms, allowing them to help him up from the ground and support his weight.

Liam’s voice is quiet and small when he says, “I think it’s my leg.”

“I think we better get him to the nurse,” Stiles says.

Coach lets them go. Scott and Stiles move quickly off the field, supporting the still hobbling Liam between them.

If they needed irrefutable proof that Liam *isn’t* supernatural, they definitely just got it.

—

After changing out of his gear, Isaac meets Scott outside the school by the front entrance.

“So?” Isaac asks.

“We’re taking Liam to the hospital,” Scott says, scent full of guilt. “It

might be a sprain, but it could also be a break.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” Isaac offers.

“No, no, don’t worry about it,” Scott says, shaking his head.

Isaac is definitely going to worry about it. Scott looks so sad and discouraged. Isaac knows what Scott’s like. He knows Scott’s beating himself up about this, convincing himself he’s completely and totally to blame. He’s not.

Isaac tells him as much. “It was an accident, Scott.”

Scott just shrugs.

Before anything more can be said, Stiles runs over, saying, “Hey, Scotty, ready to go?”

“Yeah, sure,” Scott says, passive and halfhearted.

And then, because luck is cruel and nonexistent, Derek’s car pulls up. Isaac sighs in exasperation, head falling back and eyes screwing shut. He wants to disappear. He wants the ground to open up and swallow him whole.

It doesn’t.

Derek, however, rolls down the passenger window, and says, “Coming, Isaac?”

Isaac’s head tips forward, eyes opening. He turns to Stiles, finding a shit-eating grin, and says, pointing, “Not a word, Stiles. Not a word.”

Isaac marches forward, climbing into the front seat of Derek’s car and slamming the door with unnecessary force. He rolls up the window as quickly as he can.

Isaac doesn’t speak until they’re out of the parking lot, but when he does, it’s an accusatory, “You couldn’t have waited ten more seconds?”

“What? No ‘how was your day?’ or ‘thanks for picking me up?’” Derek asks, and he’s smirking, barely concealed laughter in his words.

“This is payback for calling you embarrassing, isn’t it? You *know* Stiles is *never* going to let me live this down,” Isaac says. He definitely isn’t whining.

“You embarrass yourself just fine without my help,” is all Derek says.

Isaac kind of hates him, but, mostly, he loves him. In that infuriating, brotherly way. It’s a feeling Isaac hasn’t felt in years. It kickstarts a dull ache in his heart, but also spreads a smile across his face.

Well, Isaac can take a little pain if it means life will stay like this.

—

When they get back to the loft, Isaac flops down on the couch, hoping to do some homework and not check his phone every five minutes for updates from Scott.

So, Isaac sinks into the plush cushions, wriggling to get more comfortable. *God, he loves this couch.*

“Okay, Isaac, seriously, can you at least take your shoes off? What, were you raised in a barn?” Derek urges, exasperated.

Isaac is already sitting up to untie his laces, not at all bothered by the simple request, but he can’t stop himself from saying, “A freezer, actually.”

When he looks up at Derek, amused by his own stupid humor, he finds one of those signature deadpan stares. Derek huffs, “Just – Take your shoes off and do your homework.”

Isaac laughs, and throws one of his sneakers at Derek because he knows he’ll catch it.

Except, he doesn’t.

It bounces off Derek’s left shoulder, and Isaac almost falls off the couch in shock at the consequences of his own actions.

Derek slowly turns around, face just as blank as before.

“That was payback,” Isaac says, “for the glass.”

It’s a risky move, but, when Derek’s expression cracks, it’s in a smile. Still, his words don’t reflect the fondness of his gaze. “I’m having serious regrets about letting you move in here.”

Isaac shrugs, “Too late. Condition number one, remember? You’re stuck with me.”

Derek's smile grows just a little wider, "Yeah, guess I am."

Not long after, Braeden returns to the loft. She's dressed in professional clothing, but she wears it with her usual confidence and effortless cool. She comes bearing files, all pertaining to the family-murdering axe murder. She drops them on the metal table alongside a badge that reads: *U.S. Marshal*.

Isaac sits on the couch, watching Derek flip through the documents. "There's nothing here about Kate," he says. "This killer used an axe."

"*Actually*, he used a military tomahawk," Braeden says.

Derek looks up at her. "That's not in this report."

"I know," Braeden says, vague and smiling only a little. She's pushing Derek's buttons, but not in the same way others would. She's doing it intentionally, she's doing it with care, pushing *just* so.

Isaac really likes her.

"You gonna tell me what else you know?" Derek asks.

"Not yet," Braeden says. "'Cause I don't really know much."

Isaac stays slumped on the couch, just observing and listening. He takes in the information, but also the energy coursing between Derek and Braeden. There's a hint of something there, but Isaac can't tell if it's mutual attraction or mutual mistrust.

"But you know something," Derek says. It's not a question, though it could be, if he was willing to give up even a little bit of control. (But he isn't. Whatever might be brewing between Derek and Braeden, it's new, and Derek doesn't give easily.)

Derek closes the file, turning to fully face Braeden. He sets the folder on the table between them, eyebrows raised expectantly.

"Maybe," Braeden says simply. "The problem is: the people I need to talk to right now, don't talk to people like you."

"You want me to wait for you?" Derek asks.

"I want you to trust me," Braeden says, leaning in a little. A year ago, that would be like asking a sailor not to swear. Or a rabid dog not to

bite. Now, though, trust isn't so outside of Derek's nature.

Isaac simmers with pride knowing that he's part of the reason Derek has grown so much and so positively. He's expecting some bitterness, something like jealousy at the knowledge that Isaac had to *teach* Derek kindness. But the feeling doesn't come. Because Isaac had to learn kindness too. Isaac had to learn trust. In fact, he's learning right alongside Derek.

"And why would I trust you?" Derek asks, pressing closer to Braeden, competing against her movement. "I don't know anything about you."

"Yeah, well, I know you," Braeden says, voice dipping softer. Her head tilts, "And I know what you really want."

Derek goes quiet. He doesn't say anything, but he keeps his eyes locked with Braeden's.

Isaac has a feeling they forgot he was here. Maybe he should clear his throat or drop something on the floor, anything to remind them of his presence. Isaac doesn't. He's stopped, just in time, by Braeden saying, "You want what Kate stole from you."

Braeden starts to round the table, coming to stand in front of Derek. She walks right up to him, not at all intimidated by his potential threat or power. Isaac isn't surprised. He doesn't really know Braeden, but he's seen her in times of danger, and she's never been scared.

Braeden isn't scared to go toe to toe with a werewolf, and she has the scar on her neck to prove it.

"*Briseann an dúchas trí shúile an chait*," Braeden says, slipping into a foreign tongue. "It means the true nature of someone is reflected in their eyes. In your case... the color of your eyes."

Isaac briefly wonders how Braeden found out about the change in Derek's eye color, but he doesn't ask.

Braeden turns to walk away, picking up her jacket from its spot hanging over the back of a chair.

Isaac watches Derek. His eyes flit from side to side, moving fast like he's thinking, quick and calculated. Then, he settles. Derek comes to a decision, and presents it with confidence. He grabs Braeden's gun from the table, turns, and says, "You get a week."

Derek gently tosses Braeden her gun, and, as it passes Isaac's field of vision, a sudden and unexpected idea surfaces. Isaac had never even considered the possibility, but, now that the thought is there, he can't ignore it. He has to ask.

"Hey, you're a weapons expert, right?"

Braeden turns to Isaac, staring at him like maybe she really did forget he was there. She shrugs, "Something like that."

Isaac holds up a hand, and says, "Um, okay, wait here."

Then, Isaac stands from the couch, quickly darting up the spiral stairs to his bedroom. He nearly trips on the last step, but stumbles into his room regardless. He doesn't stop, just grabs the item from his bedside table, and turns right back around.

Isaac runs down the stairs, skidding to a stop in front of Braeden. He holds out the item in his hand, revealing Allison's ring dagger.

"Do you know how to use one of these?" Isaac asks.

"A Chinese ring dagger?" Braeden questions, looking up from the knife. Her eyes stray to Derek for just a moment, then come back to Isaac. "It's definitely not my go to weapon, but, yeah, I can manage."

Before Isaac loses his nerve, he blurts, "Can you teach me?"

Braeden looks Isaac up and down, head tipping ever-so-slightly left. She watches Isaac closely for a minute, drinking him in. Isaac lets her. Then, her head falls back to neutral, and she says, "You know what... sure. They're usually used in pairs though, where's the – where's the other one?"

Isaac pauses. He folds his fingers over the blade of the dagger, swallows, and says, "Um. I don't, I don't know. This... It..."

This was Allison's. It's not even mine. I don't know why this matters.

"I can get you a second one," Braeden says, like it's nothing, like maybe she senses Isaac is upset.

Then, Braeden looks away, and says to Derek, "I'll see you in a week."

She turns to leave, and, running the risk of annoyance, Isaac stops her again. He can't let this moment pass. He's not guaranteed another one, he knows that much. He has to say this. He has to.

“Uh, Braeden?”

She looks over her shoulder, but doesn't say anything.

“I never, um, I never properly thanked you. For saving my life. So.” Isaac glances down at his feet, then back up, “Thank you.”

“It's no big deal,” Braeden says, “I was just doing a job.”

And Isaac knows that. He knows that's what he was to Braeden. He was just a job, just a paycheck.

But, to Isaac, Braeden was so much more.

“It was a big deal to me,” Isaac admits. And, again, “Thank you.”

This time, when Braeden walks away, Isaac lets her go.

Only when the loft door is shut and Braeden's footsteps have faded, does Isaac turn to face Derek. He's watching Isaac with a peculiar glint in his eyes.

Isaac expects Derek to ask questions, expects him to pry, but he doesn't. Instead, he just says, “Put the knife away and we can order pizza for dinner.”

Isaac's eyes flick to the dagger in his grip. “Yeah, okay.”

Then, as Isaac walks by, Derek shoots a hand out to ruffle his hair. “Proud of you.”

Isaac swats away the offending hand, curling out of reach with a sound like a hiss. He mumbles, “Hate you,” and his heart jumps.

—

They're eating greasy, way too hot pizza – at the table, not on the couch – when Derek's phone rings. It's sitting face up between them, flashing with a contact that makes Isaac's stomach drop.

Sheriff Stilinski.

The Benefactor

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 4 episode 4

Word count: 7,550

There was a murder at the hospital. The axe murderer came back for the last surviving member of the family – the family of supernatural cannibals.

It seems, as usual, Stiles' intuition was right. The family-murdering axe murderer is definitely more than a human evil.

(And Scott got caught in the middle of it all because, of course, he did.)

"Hey, let's get everyone off the roof," Sheriff Stilinski's voice carries through the dark, reaching Isaac and Derek in their hiding spot. Then, a little quieter, but not unheard by the werewolves, "And, uh, see if you can stall the M.E. for five minutes. I've got an expert of my own coming to take a look."

"You have an expert in teenage cannibals?" Deputy Parrish's voice follows.

"Five minutes, Parrish," Stilinski repeats.

Isaac and Derek wait for the deputies to vacate the roof, then they step out of the shadows, standing over the victim's body.

Stilinski turns back around, heart giving a small jump at the shock of their appearance. Still, he remains focused, saying, "Ah, I guess you've been there long enough to hear we need to be quick about this." Stilinski climbs up to the second level of the roof. "Scott said he called himself a, uh, a wendigo."

"Cannibalistic shape-shifters," Derek confirms. "But, I haven't heard of them in Beacon Hills for a *long* time... Must have been well-hidden." The wind shifts, and a smell hits Isaac's nose. Derek must catch it too because he turns, looking around. "How many people did Scott say were up here?"

"Just Sean and the axe murderer who, uh, apparently, has no mouth,"

Stilinski says. It's certainly an alarming detail, but, right now, Isaac is more focused on Derek. He's coming closer to the edge of the roof, peering down at the world below. Stilinski adds, "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

Derek ignores him in favor of saying, "There was someone else... Someone young. And male."

"You can smell his fear?" Stilinski asks.

Isaac finally speaks up, "And his blood."

—

It's not like Scott to lie.

Isaac can't stop thinking about it. Scott only ever lies when he's desperate or scared or trying to protect someone.

Something happened on that roof. Something Scott doesn't want the police – or maybe even Derek – to know about. Something bad, probably.

Isaac can't stop worrying about it. He's certain the smell of his doubts are flooding Derek's car, his senses, but Isaac can't stop. It's not like Scott to lie.

"You want me to drop you off at Scott's house, don't you?" Derek asks, breaking the tense silence. They're at redlight, allowing Derek to watch him. Isaac wishes he wouldn't. They know each other too well by now. Derek knows every twitch of his face and hands and legs.

"Maybe..." Isaac admits, voice quiet. He sort of needs to see Scott for himself, see that he's okay, see that Isaac is just reading too far into things. He'll never be able to rest if he doesn't.

"Fine," Derek says. "But you'll have to find your own way home."

It's an empty threat. If Isaac needed Derek, he would be there in a heartbeat. Besides, Isaac is more fixated on the casual way Derek just said *home*.

And so, Derek takes Isaac to the McCall house, letting him go with a quiet, "Be safe."

Isaac finds the front door ajar, but that's not the most concerning part. That award goes to Scott and Stiles. They're sprawled together at the

bottom of the stairs, limbs tangled up and grappling at each other's legs and feet.

"Seriously," Isaac says. "*How* do you two losers even survive?"

From the floor, Stiles flips him the bird.

"Isaac? What are you doing here?" Scott asks, breaking free of Stiles' hold and moving to his feet.

"Uh. Stilinski called Derek to come to the hospital so he could get his expert opinion on the murder," Isaac starts, not entirely sure how to explain his presence. Coming here seemed so logical two minutes ago. "He, um, Stilinski said there were only two people on the roof – just you and the wendigo – but there was a third scent and blood and... It just made me nervous, is all."

Isaac scratches the back of his neck, face scrunched up and unsure. Scott and Stiles look at Isaac, then at each other, then back again. Isaac knows what they're doing. They're communicating wordlessly, sizing Isaac up and trying to decide whether or not to trust him with this.

Apparently coming to a conclusion, Scott sighs, "Okay, come in. Close the door."

Isaac steps inside, clicking the door closed behind him. The threshold has been crossed. Whatever's going on, Isaac's in it now. But, regardless, Scott and Stiles still don't say anything. The three of them stand in the entryway in awkward, stilted silence.

That is, until Stiles snaps, "Oh my god, Scott! Just tell him!"

Instantly, Scott blurts, "I bit someone."

Isaac's jaw drops.

"It was an – okay, it wasn't an accident, but I didn't have a choice either! I–"

"You... bit someone?" Isaac interrupts, speaking slow and uncertain. He's pretty sure his heart is racing, some unknown emotion building inside him.

"To save his life!" Stiles interjects.

"What?" Isaac asks, whispering in his confusion. "What happened?"

Again, Scott sighs. They're still standing at the bottom of the stairs, making no signs of movement. They're frozen in this moment, on the brink of something that can never be undone.

"Sean, the wendigo, attacked Liam at the hospital," Scott begins. "I tried to stop Sean, and we ended up on the roof, but Liam fell over the edge, and I was holding him up, but Sean was fighting me, and I was losing my grip, so I..." Scott exhales a huge breath of air. "I bit him. In order to save him. Then, the axe murderer with no mouth showed up and killed Sean."

Isaac's heart is still pounding. He doesn't know what to think or feel. Mostly, he feels sorry. For Scott, and also for Liam. Scott never wanted the bite. He went out into the woods one night with Stiles, and came out as a completely different species. Scott wasn't given a choice, he was thrown into this world without warning or consent.

And, now, Liam is suffering the same fate.

"Where is Liam now?" Isaac asks, glancing between Scott and Stiles.

Scott's rubbing where neck meets shoulder, looking up at Isaac in a sheepish, guilty sort of way. "Well, um, I – I sort of panicked?"

Isaac blinks, eyebrows dropping. Resigned exasperation drips into his tone, "What did you two do?"

"Hey! I didn't do anything!" Stiles exclaims. "It was all Scott. He just kidnapped that little sucker without any remorse."

"You *kidnapped* him?" Isaac's voice is getting louder, tinted with distress and a touch of frustration. Then, volume dipping, landing more in concern, "Is he still here?"

"No," Scott mumbles, scuffing his shoe on the floor. "He ran off."

"So, let me get this straight. You bit him, kidnapped him, and then *lost* him?" Isaac asks, entirely incredulous.

"I'm not feeling too good about it either!" Scott defends. He's not angry, just tired and overwhelmed.

Isaac softens. He takes a breath, reminding himself of how difficult this must be for Scott. He finds empathy, recognizing the guilt and fear Scott must be feeling.

“Well, we’ll just have to figure it out,” Isaac says. “Tomorrow, at school, with level heads.”

Scott locks eyes with Isaac, expression open and appreciative. “Yeah. Thank you.”

For Scott’s sake, Isaac can pretend this is all okay. He can push forward with calm practicality. But, on the inside, Isaac is sufficiently panicked. This isn’t okay. This is trending towards disaster.

—

Scott didn’t explicitly tell Isaac not to say anything to Derek, but he didn’t have to. Isaac saw just how scared Scott was to tell *him*, someone trusted and unquestionably pack. If Scott could barely tell Isaac, then he’s definitely not ready to tell Derek. And Isaac can respect that. He can understand it. The situation is complicated enough as it stands.

The issue is: Isaac can’t directly lie to Derek. If Derek asks what happened, Isaac isn’t sure what he’s going to tell him. Derek can read Isaac like a book, knows when he’s lying even if his heart doesn’t stutter.

As Isaac takes the elevator up to the loft, he’s turning the dilemma over in his mind, again and again. He’s trying to discern his options. He’s trying to figure out how to avoid straight answers, how to navigate the coming conversation without betraying Scott or Derek.

None of that is needed, though. When Isaac steps into the loft, he finds a much more pressing matter.

Peter is leaning against the metal table, shirtless with a gaping wound in his chest. Derek is holding up a blow torch. And, the icing on the cake, there’s a tomahawk on the table coated in black blood.

“Oh my god,” Isaac exhales. He quickly secures the loft’s lock, rushing into the room and switching from one disaster to the next with a little too much ease. “What the hell is going on?”

Derek spares Isaac a glance, but doesn’t answer. Instead, he says to Peter, “The axe was laced in wolfsbane. I don’t know the species so... I’m going to have to burn it out.”

Derek pops open a lighter, giving life to a small flicker of flame. It dances in his hand, drawing Peter’s attention. He’s breathing heavily,

staring at the flame with contempt. He pants, “I think I can handle a little fire.”

Derek smiles humorlessly. Isaac can tell he’s enjoying this, at least a little. Then, he knocks the wind out of Peter’s sails, using the lighter to ignite a blow torch. It’s a pointed move, one that sparks a burst of blue fire, noisy and hot between them.

Peter loses his gusto. He sighs, “Ah, hell.”

Then, Derek brings the flame to Peter’s chest. Immediately, Peter starts to scream. Isaac can’t watch. He stutters back a step, eyes squinting shut. They’re not fully closed, kept open just enough so Isaac can see the blurry shapes of Derek and Peter and fire. But, like this, Isaac doesn’t have to see the wolfsbane evaporating straight from the wound or the pain in Peter’s eyes.

When Derek pulls the flame away and Peter slumps to the floor, the heavy scent of wolfsbane and burning skin fade, and Isaac finally opens his eyes. Derek is already watching him, snuffed blow torch in hand and something not unlike sympathy in the furrow of his brows.

Isaac doesn’t look away, letting Derek be the one to break their gaze. When he does, he sets the torch down and offers Peter a hand. Peter hesitates for just a moment before he gives, allowing Derek to pull him to his feet.

Peter is still breathing harshly, voice rough, “He said he was after you.”

“How does a guy with no mouth say anything?” Derek asks, confirming Isaac’s suspicions. The attacker was the same axe-bearing killer who slaughtered the family of wendigos.

And, now, apparently, he’s after Derek too. This night just keeps getting better.

Peter picks up an object from the table. He holds it out to Derek. It’s a black glove, decked out with a keypad. “With this,” he says.

Isaac doesn’t care how the killer communicates. He only cares about stopping him. He only cares about Derek.

—

It’s the day of the full moon, and Derek is making Isaac go to school.

Though, it's not the full moon Isaac is worried about. It's the killer with no mouth and a tomahawk. The one who's after Derek.

Derek isn't fazed, says he's survived worse. It's true, but it doesn't ease any of Isaac's anxiety. There's something about this killer. Something more. His attacks aren't random. They're targeted. And, so far, all his victims have been supernatural.

"Don't worry about it," Derek says, car stopped in front of the school. "I can hold my own in a fight."

Isaac begs to differ. Derek gets his ass handed to him on the regular. He loses more fights than he wins. Of course, Isaac can't say that. He has no doubt in his mind that Derek would beat *him* in a fight if he did.

"Isaac, get out of the car," Derek says, not harsh, but not indulgent either.

"Please don't die while I'm in history," Isaac says, aiming for something lighter than the weight of panic settled on his chest.

Derek shrugs, "Sure. I'll schedule 'get murdered' for your French period, does that work for you?"

Isaac huffs, but he's smiling. It's enough to make his legs work again and his body leaves the car. Though, when Derek drives off, Isaac is left standing there unmoving, his feet planted to the pavement.

It's the full moon, probably. It's amplifying Isaac's nerves, turning him frayed around the edges. He feels like he's floating, needing his anchor today more than ever.

"Hey, Isaac, buddy, what are you doing?" Stiles asks, coming up next to him and pulling Isaac out of his daze.

He blinks, "Uh."

Stiles' eyebrows pull together, "Are you okay?"

Stiles claps a hand on Isaac's shoulder. It's a move that would have made him flinch a year ago, but now it's grounding. It presses Isaac's consciousness back into him, no longer drifting in and out of control. Isaac clears his throat, and with it clears away the fog.

"Fine," Isaac says without thinking. Then, more deliberately, "Yeah,

I'm fine."

"I'm going to choose to believe you because we are way past lying to each other, and I really need to help Scott find Liam before class starts. You coming?" Stiles asks.

It's a genuine question, giving Isaac the opportunity to step back and rescind his involvement. Isaac doesn't. Instead, he says, "Sure, let's go."

So, Isaac and Stiles burst into the school, darting past classrooms and between students. They round a corner into the locker room's hallway, immediately spotting Liam with his head ducked low and Scott on his heels.

"Liam, hey!" Stiles calls out, finger pointing, like he's using it to pin Liam down.

Liam's bag is slung over one shoulder and there's a gauze dressing placed over his forearm, presumably where Scott bit him. But it's his eyes that draw Isaac's attention. They're flitting in every direction. He's looking for an exit, but there isn't one. Stiles and Isaac are coming right towards him while Scott is rushing him from behind, quickly boxing him in.

"We need to talk," Scott says frantically. Isaac knows he's freaked out, knows the situation is hard, but this isn't the right approach. They're cornering Liam, ambushing and overwhelming him. This is never going to work, all they're going to do is spook him.

Except Liam isn't scared. He's angry. "No, you need to back the hell up, okay? All of you."

"Can you just listen for one second?" Scott asks. He starts desperate and distraught, but tapers down as he goes, emotion still present, but not so overpowering. "Please?"

Liam's anger dilutes. It's still there, pulsing in his veins, but he stops trying to run. He stills apart from his heaving chest. Liam motions for Scott to continue, giving him an opening, giving him a chance.

Scott readies himself to speak. He looks at Isaac, then back to Liam. He swallows.

"Liam," Scott starts, and Isaac holds his breath.

Isaac doesn't know how Scott is going to play this, but it's imperative that he chooses his next words very carefully. He only has one shot at this. Scott has once chance to get this right. If he blunders this moment, if he says the wrong thing, Liam is never going to trust them. And he *has* to trust them.

Then, Scott blows it.

"We're brothers now," Scott finishes, and Isaac chokes on air.

Liam's face twists in confusion, "What?"

"Oh god. That's..." Stiles mumbles. This is a train wreck.

"What are you talking about? We just met and you *bit* me!" Liam argues. And, yeah, looking at this from Liam's perspective, they must seem completely off the rails.

"The bite..." Scott says, and Isaac internally begs, *don't say it, don't go there*, but it's no use. Scott says it. "The bite is a gift."

Isaac facepalms. He can't believe this is happening. It just keeps getting worse.

"Scott, stop. Please, stop," Stiles urges, practically wincing. He crosses the hallway to stand next to Scott, patting his shoulder in companionable comfort. He points at Liam, "You. You, we are trying to help you, you little runt."

Liam nods, clearly out of patience. "By kidnapping me?"

Isaac takes a pointed step away from Scott and Stiles, "Yeah, I – I had nothing to do with that. Sorry."

"Just to clarify. *Scott* kidnapped you, okay? I aided and abetted. And, Isaac," Stiles turns a glare onto him, "was no help. As usual."

Isaac is preparing to fire back – something dumb about already being a fugitive once before – when Scott cuts him off.

"Liam," he says, giving the kid that powerful Scott McCall look, the one that sees right through to your soul. "I've gone through this before. Something's happening to you. Something big."

Liam, it seems, is immune to Scott's brown-eyed gaze. Instead of caving under the weight, he just lowers his brows and says, "Nothing's happening to me." He rips off the dressing, holding up his perfectly

healed arm. “Nothing.”

Then, he storms off.

There’s a moment of charged silence as their fate becomes clear. Liam’s body accepted the bite. When the full moon rises tonight, Liam will become a werewolf. He’ll become Scott’s first beta.

“Well,” Stiles says, cutting the tension. “That went about as well as expected.”

“Yeah, and he’s not our only problem,” Isaac says, knowing it’s time to break the news. He turns around, facing Scott and Stiles instead of the empty hallway. “The axe murderer came after Peter last night. And he said Derek is next.”

“Shit,” Stiles breathes.

“Is Peter okay?” Scott asks, and he genuinely cares. He’s so sickeningly, morally perfect.

“Unfortunately,” Isaac says, but they all know he’s putting on a show. Isaac might not like Peter, but he doesn’t want him dead. If not for Peter’s sake, then for Derek’s.

“Well, my dad’s been working the case. You and Derek could go to the station after school?” Stiles suggests.

It’s not a groundbreaking idea, and it’s certainly not guaranteed safety, but it’s direction. It’s a plan of action, and it settles something in Isaac. It tethers him a little more, pulling his awareness closer to the surface, farther away from the wolf within.

—

“I’m not sharing my basement,” Malia says.

The pack is gathered between the school buses, joining together to share the news about Liam and figure out what to do with him when the moon rises tonight.

“Actually, it’s my basement,” Lydia says, hands twiddling and smiling in that fakely nice way of hers. “And my mom noticed how you tore it up last time.”

“All right, she’s still learning,” Stiles says, coming to Malia’s defense.

Honestly, Isaac feels for Malia. He remembers how hard it was before he found his anchor in Derek. Sure, he had been able to use the happy memories of his dad for a while, but they were weak and tainted with negativity. Before Derek, Isaac had never felt secure in his control. Isaac remembers clinging to his humanity as it continually slipped through his fingers like grains of salt.

Malia still hasn't mastered control. She hasn't found her anchor yet; though, looking between her and Stiles, she seems well on her way.

"We're going to use the boathouse for Liam," Scott explains. "It's got support beams. We can chain him to one of them."

"But how do we get him out to the lake house if he doesn't trust us?" Kira asks.

Any hopes of Liam willingly accepting their help have long since vanished. There's no fixing that tonight. They can tackle regaining Liam's trust another day. *After* they get him through his first full moon without hurting anyone, himself included.

"I say if it keeps him from murdering someone we just chloroform the little bastard and throw him in the lake," Stiles says.

He's obviously joking, but Malia isn't. She raises her hand with an, "I'm in."

"We're not killing or kidnapping him," Scott says, leaving no room for argument.

Isaac mutters a quiet, "Not again, at least."

Stiles gives a startled chuckle, lifting a fist like he's going in for a bump, but Isaac ignores him.

"Then let's be smarter," Lydia says, and, with the genius she usually provides, "We tell him there's a party and invite him."

"So, you're going to ask out a sophomore?" Stiles asks.

"No, I'm done with teenage boys," Lydia says. "*But*, if we're playing a trick on someone... let's use the trickster."

All eyes turn to Kira. She startles, "Who? Me? No way. Not me."

"Yes, you," Lydia says, not letting the idea drop. Lydia isn't necessarily stubborn, not like Stiles is, but she can be persistent. When she sets

her mind to something, she becomes unstoppable in her powers of persuasion. It's seen in the way she continues, "You know what they call a female fox? A vixen."

"Me?" Kira repeats.

And Isaac, though he has very little experience of his own, can understand her hesitation. Kira doesn't exactly scream seduction. She's pretty, sure, but she's awkward and clumsy in her self doubt.

If their hopes are riding on Kira's prowess as a flirt, then they might as well go with the chloroform.

(Again: pot, kettle. Isaac is keenly aware he has no grounds for judgment.)

"You can do it, Kira," Lydia says, full of the confidence Kira lacks. "Be a vixen."

—

When the group disperses with Kira on her way to find Liam, Isaac stops Scott before he can get too far. They hang back between the buses, giving them a moment to talk.

Isaac feels a little silly asking, but he does anyway. "Are you sure it's okay that I'm going to help Derek?"

"Yeah, yes, of course," Scott says, like Isaac is definitely being silly, but he doesn't mind. "It's what you *should* be doing. Derek needs your help, and five of us is enough to handle Liam."

Scott could probably handle Liam all on his own if he wasn't so stuck in his uncertainty. Scott's holding himself back and hiding behind other people's words, but he doesn't have to. He's already been leading their pack to greatness, teaching and guiding them into better people. He could be so good at this. He could be such an amazing alpha for Liam, just as he has been for Isaac.

Scott has the experience and the expertise to do this. He has the heart, all he's missing is the confidence to be forthright. He's shaken and unprepared, and he only has a few hours to change that.

With that in mind, Isaac adds, "You know, you shouldn't be trying to emulate Derek. He was a terrible alpha."

Scott's expression shifts, his spirit seems to slump. "I have no idea what I'm doing, Iz. I'm in way over my head."

"Maybe," Isaac smiles. Then, with all the confidence in the world, "But, just like all the other messes you've gotten yourself into, you'll figure this out."

That's when Isaac's phone buzzes. It's a message from Derek: **Out front.**

"Derek's here, I gotta go," Isaac says. He shoves his hands in his pockets, and, a little stiff, "Good luck tonight."

"You too," Scott says. "Keep me updated, yeah? We can talk later?"

Isaac nods, "Yeah."

The two part ways, and Isaac lets his long legs carry him to the front of the school with effortless speed. He slides into Derek's car, chucking his backpack into the backseat with familiarity.

"Easy," Derek hisses. "You're gonna break something."

Isaac scoffs, "Just drive."

"You have no manners," Derek mutters, though he's already pulling out of the parking lot.

Isaac ignores him, instead saying, "No sign of the mouthless murderer yet?"

"No," Derek says. "I'm sure he won't attack till it's dark."

Isaac hums. "That's sort of dumb, though, isn't it? It's the full moon tonight. The longer he waits, the stronger you'll be."

Derek doesn't say anything for a moment. It seems like he's thinking, pausing way too long for the response he comes up with, "Maybe we can use that to our advantage."

Isaac breathes in through his nose, unintentionally pulling in the scents around him. It's mostly the lingering smell of leather car seats and something a little plasticity, but Derek's scent is underneath. There's something different about it though, like its sharpness has dulled.

They pull up at the sheriff's station before Isaac can lock it down, so,

for now, he doesn't mention it.

Isaac focuses on the task at hand, following Derek into the station where they meet Sheriff Stilinski in his office, showing him the tech Peter stole from the axe murderer.

Stilinski picks up the glove, turning it over in his hands. "I still don't get how this guy has no mouth. I mean... How – How can he eat?"

Derek looks up from the device. "Peter didn't get a chance to ask. He was fighting him off with a tomahawk," he runs his fingers over his sternum, "buried in his chest."

"Ehh – And who runs around with a tomahawk?" Stilinski questions, his voice is hushed, but it doesn't matter. He's been heard. Deputy Parrish is standing in the office doorway.

"I carried one for IED removal in Afghanistan," Parrish says. Isaac and Derek briefly meet eyes. "It's military," the deputy says, stepping into the office. He points at teched up gloves, "And so is that."

"Do you know what it's used for?" Derek asks, broaching the question almost cautiously.

"Well, this one looks like it's been modified," Parrish says.

A look passes between Derek and Stilinski. They're assessing the situation, weighing the risk and reward. After a beat, Derek gives a small nod of approval.

Sheriff Stilinski moves to shut his office door, barring any other stragglers from eavesdropping or entering. Then, he says, "Show us."

Parrish sits down at Stilinski's desk, getting to work on connecting the modified glove to the sheriff's laptop. Derek and Stilinski stand behind the desk, peering over Parrish's shoulder with impatient eyes. Isaac, not disinterested, but maybe a little less eager, sits down on the comfy leather couch instead.

Isaac is still worried about the assailant, but his anxiety is mellowing out. The axe murderer might still be after Derek, but the moon is starting to rise, and its power is seeping into Isaac's bones. Isaac feels confident that, together, he and Derek can take this guy, whoever he is.

Besides, coming to the police station was a great idea. The attacker is

less likely to charge Derek here, and Parrish is onto something. He's giving them information, and that's always an advantage.

Eventually, Parrish says, "Okay, I think I got an IP Address."

Isaac sits up a little straighter as Stilinski leans in, asking, "That means we can find him, right?"

"Definitely," Parrish nods, still typing rapidly. "Especially if—"

On the desk, the fingers of the mechanical glove suddenly whirl and twitch, flickering with movement.

"What was that?" Derek asks.

Isaac gets to his feet, taking slow steps towards the desk. He stands at its side, looking down at the glove. He doesn't dare touch it, just watches for signs of activity, but nothing comes.

Isaac cast his gaze upwards, locking eyes with Derek.

"I think I found a message," Parrish says, continuing to navigate the laptop. "Does anyone recognize the handle 'Benefactor'?"

Derek averts Isaac's eyes, turning his over to the computer screen. He reads out, "'Money transferred.' What does that mean?"

Isaac has an inkling. It's not a good one.

"That means this guy is not just a killer," Stilinski says. He stands fully, back straightening. "He's an assassin."

"He's being paid? To kill me?" Derek clarifies.

Stilinski nods. He doesn't mention the family of wendigos, or Peter, or the trait all three targets have in common. But it doesn't matter. Isaac is already putting the pieces together.

The axe murderer is a supernatural assassin.

It's the 'something more' that Isaac was missing. The attacker isn't operating alone. He's only a single piece of the puzzle. He's part of a larger scheme.

Still, even if everything isn't resolved tonight, this piece can be. Isaac remains firm in the belief, in the knowledge, that he and Derek can handle this. Together.

And so, Parrish continues to track the location of the IP Address, and Isaac continues to wait. As he does, his phone vibrates.

There's a text from Scott, which states: **The plan worked. Well, kind of. Liam is chained up in the boathouse, but he invited the whole school so we had to actually throw a party.**

Isaac fights back a smile, and types out: **It's a good thing Lydia's there.** Then, in a second message: **The axe murderer isn't just a killer. He's getting paid by someone called The Benefactor. He's an assassin.**

Scott doesn't respond right away, but Isaac wasn't really expecting him to. The messages are just a brief update, serving to keep each other in the loop. They're staying in touch, but their focuses remain separate.

"I've got it. I've got the location," Parrish says, jogging Isaac's attention. "He's... He's at the school?"

Of course he is.

—

Isaac, Derek, and Stilinski arrive at the school. They step through the double doors, shrouded in quiet trepidation. Stilinski has his gun and flashlight held out in front of him, not letting them waver for a second. Isaac doesn't blame him. He's seen enough catastrophe in this school to be wary of entering after dark.

The school is eerie and still, but Isaac smells it when they broach the hallways. It's all too familiar, but it still burns when it hits, like it's running Isaac dry. It's the thick, coppery scent of, "Blood."

Isaac's voice is barely a whisper, but Derek turns on him at once, "What?"

"I smell blood," Isaac repeats.

Derek's expression morphs into one of shock. "That doesn't make sense... I should have caught the smell before we walked in."

The words drop something heavy into Isaac's stomach. It's fear, it's dread, it's realization. All at once, Isaac thinks he might know what's gone missing from Derek's own scent. Still, he doesn't bring it up. Not here, not now.

Not when there's a pool of blood spilling out from under a classroom door. It's stagnant and still, not inching forward or expanding.

Derek steps towards the door. He's reaching for the handle, about to turn it in his grip, when Stilinski stops him with a hushed, "Hold on, hold on." He sticks his hand out in front of Derek, blocking his reach. "*You nervous makes me nervous.*"

Stilinski peers through the door's small square window, using his flashlight to illuminate the room inside. Then, Stilinski presses flush along the side of the wall, and, careful as can be, he opens the door. He twists the doorknob in slow increments, sliding it to a full rotation. He eases the door open one, two inches. He stops.

Derek ducks into a crouch, looking past Stilinski's legs and through the crack of the door. "It's an explosive," he whispers. "A Claymore."

Footsteps.

Derek stays watching the explosive, but Isaac turns. There, standing at the top of the school steps, is the mouthless assassin with not one, but two tomahawks in his grip.

He meets Isaac's eye, then winds back his arm.

"Get down!" Isaac yells. He's not close enough to reach Stilinski, but Derek is, and, luckily, he spots the assassin just in time. Derek doesn't hold back, just roughly tosses Stilinski out of the way, slamming him into the wall of lockers on the opposite side of the hallway.

Then, a tomahawk pierces the cinder block where Stilinski's head was only a second prior.

The assassin easily moves by them, retrieving the tomahawk and starting to fight. He lunges at Derek, his desired target, who dodges and lands a punch of his own. The assassin isn't deterred, steady in his objective.

Isaac gives into the pull of the full moon, letting his claws pop and his fangs slide into place. He's making a move, readying to attack the assassin from behind, when, all at once, the world switches to slow motion.

The assassin is swinging both tomahawks in tandem. A single swipe feeds into the next, momentum working together in beautiful harmony.

Isaac is fossilized. Perfectly still, perfectly trapped in time.

The tomahawks continue to surge, but that's not what Isaac sees. He sees Allison, sees ring daggers, sees her fighting like it's a performance. She was so well trained her movements often seemed choreographed in their grace. It was a dance, one rehearsed and known like the scars embedded in her skin.

The assassin keeps coming at Derek, keeps knocking him back and back, but Isaac doesn't see it. He sees muscle memory. He sees second nature. He sees Allison turned to liquid while he is turned to stone.

The assassin has Derek pinned, teetering on the edge of life, and Isaac is none the wiser.

Except, that's when the tomahawks stop swinging. One falls to the ground, metal clattering and jarring Isaac awake.

He finally sees Derek. He's held against a locker. The assassin has a tomahawk poised before his throat.

Isaac lets out a howl, feeling it vibrate in his chest. Then, he launches into action. He rushes at the assassin, grabbing his axe-wielding arm. Isaac latches on and pulls until the arm twists, unnaturally so. He pulls until the assassin has no choice but to drop the second tomahawk, letting it fall to the floor beside its twin.

The assassin tries to fight back, tries to use his other arm to attack, but Isaac grabs that too. He holds the assassin's arms behind his back, spinning him away with a display of strength and forcing Derek out of his line of sight.

Stilinski is waiting there, his gun steady and pointed right at the assassin.

"You have the right to remain silent," Stilinski grinds out. "Anything you say can and will be used against you in the court of law."

Stilinski approaches with handcuffs, continuing to rattle off the assassin's rights, but Isaac is hardly paying attention. He's still in the triumph of it all. They have him. They did it. The piece clicks into place, resolved.

Only, not quite. Isaac spots movement out of the corner of his eye. Derek is peeling himself away from the lockers, shaking off the near death experience, but he's not looking at Isaac. He's staring down to

the end of the hallway, muttering a quiet, “No.”

Then, Isaac sees him. Peter.

“No, Peter, no!” Derek shouts, but there’s no stopping him. Peter is tearing towards them. Isaac has no choice but to release the assassin from his hold, giving himself just enough time to push Stilinski out of the line of fire.

For the second time that night, Stilinski is thrown to the ground. But, this time, Isaac goes with him.

As Peter leaps, Isaac rolls over onto his back, watching the attack. There’s no mercy, only pure carnage. Peter is vicious, claws slicing across the assassin’s face, over and over. Blood splatters in every direction, splashing into Peter’s face and painting the floor. The scent of it floods Isaac’s being. It’s everywhere. It’s horror.

Peter lifts the skin of the assassin’s not-mouth right off his face, holding it in his blood soaked hands. He looks up, and, even through the glow of blue, his eyes are soulless.

It’s murder.

Peter stands, and Sheriff Stilinski goes with him, face lit with fury and gun held out. Peter doesn’t even flinch, just pulls out a handkerchief, like he was prepared for this very outcome. It was planned. It was premeditated.

It was murder.

Peter stares down the barrel of Stilinski’s gun. He shakes his head in slow, even movements. Then, he turns and walks away.

“We’ve learned a better way,” Derek calls after him.

Peter doesn’t stop, “I’m a creature of habit.”

Stilinski lowers his gun.

—

Derek and Isaac don’t speak until they’re back at the loft.

“That was rough tonight,” Derek says, only once the security system is enacted. “Are you okay?”

Isaac stops walking. He stands in the middle of the loft, slowly turning to face Derek. He's standing by the door, and, even through the dark, Isaac can see him perfectly. He can see Derek's furrowed eyebrows, his rolled up sleeves, the blood speckled on his neck and the scruff of his beard.

"I'm sorry," is what Isaac says, voice breaking.

Derek moves a little hurriedly, closing the space between them in only four paces. "What are you sorry for?"

Isaac doesn't meet his eyes.

"It was because he fought with pairs, wasn't it?" Derek asks.

Isaac looks up. He doesn't know when he started crying, but he is. Just a few tears, trailing down his cheeks. Derek gently wipes one away.

"You saved my life tonight," he says.

Isaac huffs. There's a pout in his voice when he says, "I only had to 'cause I got distracted."

Derek ignores his protest, and, quietly, he announces, "I'm going to hug you now."

Isaac nods, and then Derek's arms are around him. He's holding Isaac tight, like the hug isn't just to comfort Isaac. *Good*. Derek deserves to be selfish, he deserves to take what he needs. Isaac squeezes back. Giving, giving, giving.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," Derek whispers.

Isaac doesn't respond. Derek doesn't need one, Isaac knows. He just wants to say it, wants to make it known. Isaac already knows. He knows Derek wants to protect him. He'd said it once, in the hospital. He said he would spend the rest of his life trying to keep Isaac safe. And Isaac is okay with that, as long as he's allowed to keep Derek safe too. They have to look out for each other. That's what family does. Or, at least, that's what family is supposed to do.

Isaac pulls back, but doesn't go far. Just says, "I don't know what I would do if I lost you."

Too, goes unspoken. Isaac doesn't need to be reminded of all that he's already lost. Not tonight, not when it's already so fresh in his mind.

His entire family is gone, but he's rebuilding. He and Derek are rebuilding together. They're taking what little they have left, and giving it to the other. They're making something new, something totally theirs, something made of all that Isaac has and all that Derek is. Giving, giving, giving.

"Well, I'm not going anywhere anytime soon," Derek says. Then, to bring some levity, "Especially if you keep hanging around to save my ass."

And then, they don't speak again till sunrise.

—

Isaac is exhausted. He feels on the verge of collapse, still reeling from the night's events. It all happened so fast. It escalated so quickly, and Isaac is exhausted. He wants nothing more than to shut his eyes to the world and disappear till morning, but, when his phone rings and it's Scott calling, he answers.

They've been calling almost every night before bed, and Isaac doesn't want to miss it. Even through the haze of tired and the image of blood covered hallways, Isaac still wants to talk to Scott.

So, he answers, voice hushed and tinted with emotional residue, "Hi."

"*Hey, Isaac. Are you okay? Did I wake you?*" Scott asks.

Isaac smiles, just the smallest upward tick of his lips, "Uh. You didn't wake me."

Nothing gets by Scott. Okay, a lot of things get by Scott, but not this, not the unanswered question. "*So, you're – you're not okay?*"

"It was a hard night," Isaac says. He takes a deep breath, working up to it. Then, "Peter killed the assassin right in front of us. It... It was pretty vicious."

Isaac is no stranger to bloodshed, none of them are, but this was out of his depth. It was malicious, but also... cold. It wasn't burning hot rage, it was stone cold fury. It was terrifying and unnatural and wrong.

"*Oh, shit,*" Scott says, unable to contain his surprise.

"Mm," Isaac hums. He doesn't want to talk about it, wants to get the

image out of his head, so he presses forward. "How's Liam?"

"We survived, thanks to Argent's sudden return," Scott says.

"Argent's back?" Isaac asks with a lilt of surprise.

"Yeah, he, uh..." Scott chuckles. *"He got my text."*

"What happened?" Isaac questions, readjusting to find a more comfortable position.

"Liam broke out of the boathouse, but I was able to get through to him because of Argent and..." Scott pauses. *"Because of you."*

"Me?" Isaac asks. He can hear the sleepiness in his own voice, but also curiosity and something he can't quite put his finger on.

"Because of what you said earlier. You know, that I should be my own alpha and I'd figure it out," Scott explains.

"Oh," Isaac says.

"I still have a long way to go. Liam's got a lot of anger and that's gonna make everything more difficult," Scott says with a small sigh.

"You could talk to Derek," Isaac says. Then, a little quieter in their shared space, "He wasn't the best alpha, but he still knows a lot."

"I'll think about it... I have more to tell you, but I think it should wait till tomorrow. Do you want to meet at the animal clinic during my shift?" Scott suggests.

"Okay, but why can't you tell me now?" Isaac asks. The wait makes him nervous, makes his heart beat a little faster.

"Because you sound exhausted," Scott says.

"Oh. Only a little bit," Isaac says, but it's mostly a yawn.

Scott exhales a laugh, *"Get some rest."*

And then, because Isaac knows Scott is about to hang up, he blurts, "Wait. Can you – Can you stay on the line?"

Isaac feels rattled. He feels like his heart was ripped out of his chest, then put back in upside down. He feels scared to close his eyes, and scared to keep them open. He feels all out of sorts, but the sound of

Scott's even breathing through the phone... It's a comfort, and Isaac is too far beyond his limits to deprive himself of something so simple.

"Sure, Isaac," Scott says, easy as anything,

And so, Isaac rolls over onto his side, keeping his phone nestled on the pillow next to his ear. Then, he falls asleep to the steady sound of *inhale... exhale*.

When Isaac wakes, the line is already disconnected, but it's a good thing. It's a testament to how well Scott knows Isaac. If the call was still going, Isaac would have turned inward, would have become awkward and embarrassed to the point of dysfunction.

Now, arriving at the animal clinic in mid-afternoon, Isaac is only awkward and embarrassed to the point of discomfort. And, even then, it's mild.

"Hey, Isaac. How'd you sleep?" Scott asks, leading them into the back of the animal clinic.

Coming around one side of the table, Isaac answers, "Good."

"Good," Scott repeats, smiling from the other side.

There's a pause. Isaac knows whatever Scott's about to say, it isn't going to be good. So, he lets himself revel in one last moment of quiet. He lets the calm blanket him, sheltering him in a thin layer of peace.

Then, "What did you have to tell me?"

Scott takes a deep breath, nodding like he's preparing himself. He begins, "Basically, Lydia unknowingly wrote a bunch of code, and then, at the party last night, she heard the cipher key to crack it." Scott pulls out a folded piece of paper, laying it out flat and sliding it between them. "This is what she uncovered."

Isaac skims the page. It's a list of names, some familiar and some not, all accompanied with a number.

Sean Walcott 250

David Walcott 250

Michael Walcott 250

Christina Walcott 250

Lydia Martin 17
Scott McCall 20
Demarco Montana 250
Isaac Lahey 11
Derek Hale 15
Carrie Hudson 500
Kayleen Bettcher 250
Elias Town 250

“What is this?” Isaac asks. He glances up at Scott, but only sparingly, eyes just as quickly returning to the page before him.

“It’s a list of supernaturals in Beacon Hills,” Scott says. “It’s a dead pool.”

The calm falls off Isaac’s shoulders, the peace slipping away.

Isaac keeps reading over the names. The targets: Lydia, Scott, Derek, Isaac. Any one of them could be next. The assassin last night was only the beginning. This is only just getting started, and it’s about to get so much worse.

“There’s one more thing. The cipher key, it was a name,” Scott says.

Isaac looks up. He can hear every beat of his heart in his chest, leading right up to the moment it stops. Leading right up to...

“Allison.”

I.E.D.

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 4 episode 5

Word count: 6,469

“So, the Walcotts were the first. At least, the first that we know about,” Stiles begins. “Four murders. Sean, his brother, and their parents. They were killed by a professional assassin called The Mute. Weapon of choice, a military tomahawk.”

“But then The Mute was killed by Peter Hale after he tried to blow up Derek with a Claymore mine,” Isaac interjects. He tries to keep his mind present, tries not to let it stray to the carnage and bloodshed.

“Next was Demarco. He delivered a keg to the party at Lydia’s lake house, and got decapitated outside his car,” Stiles continues. “And then last night, twenty-three year old Carrie Hudson.”

“It’s a dead pool. A – A hit list of supernatural creatures,” Scott says, meeting Stilinski with intense eye contact. He pulls the folded paper out of his pocket, setting it down on the sheriff’s desk. “This is only part of it. The rest still has to be decoded.”

“Who found this list?” Stilinski asks, eyes pouring over the page.

“Lydia,” Stiles says without missing a beat.

Stilinski looks up, “How?”

“She wrote it,” Stiles says, fumbling with his hands, fists tapping together. “Actually, she transcribed it. Without realizing it.”

“Banshee?” Stilinski asks.

“Banshee,” Stiles confirms.

“Beautiful,” the sheriff mutters. Then, “All right, what – what are these numbers next to the names?”

“We’re getting to that. *First*, you need to know that the code was broken by a cipher key,” Stiles says.

“What, you mean, like a... like a key word?” Stilinski clarifies.

“A name, actually,” Isaac says, nervously pulling on the sleeve of his sweater.

Scott speaks in quiet sorrow, “Allison.”

There’s a pause. A moment of silence where the word hangs in the air. It’s brief, maybe only thirty seconds, but it seems to stretch out in front of Isaac. He stays in limbo for a moment, heart not beating quite right and lungs fighting to function. It hurts. Grief is such a physical emotion, it evokes pain in Isaac’s skin, like a prickling all down his arms and chest.

And Scott’s face. It’s barely changed, but his eyes have hollowed out. His scent turns sour with it.

Then, Stiles opens his mouth, and the silence shatters. “Her name broke a third of the list.”

“And, uh,” Scott stammers, standing fully upright again. “We think there’s two other cipher keys.”

“Which will give us the rest of the names,” Stilinski says, nodding and cottoning on. He gets down to business, “Okay. So how do we get the cipher keys?”

“Same way we got the code,” Stiles says with an upward flick of his eyebrows.

“Lydia,” Isaac says.

“She’s been at the lake house all weekend trying to find the other two key words,” Scott explains.

There’s a less poignant pause, just a natural ebb and flow of conversation. Stilinski flips through the pictures on his desk, all evidence of each subsequent murder. Eventually, he says, “You didn’t know about Demarco or Carrie, right?”

Isaac certainly didn’t know them, but he still looks to Scott and Stiles for confirmation. They usually know more than him, but, in this instance, they’re on the same page. Neither show any signs of recognition, only shaking their heads.

“And what about these other two names on the list?” Stilinski asks,

holding up the dead pool and reading off, “‘Kayleen Bettcher’ and ‘Elias Town.’ They werewolves too?”

“I don’t know,” Scott says, leaning forward on the desk again. “But Deaton said that the nemeton would draw supernatural creatures here.”

“Here being Beacon *Hills*? Or Beacon *County*?” Stilinski asks. Out of the corner of his eye, Isaac sees Stiles head tilt back in exasperation. Still, Stilinski continues, “Population of Beacon Hills is just under 30,000.”

“And dropping,” Stiles grumbles.

Isaac rolls his eyes. He’d probably kick him if Stiles wasn’t at the opposite end of the desk.

Stilinski levels Stiles with a look of frustration, but doesn’t warrant a response. Instead, he powers ahead, “But if we’re talking Beacon County, then you’re looking at closer to 500,000... Look,” Stilinski mutters, dropping into his desk chair, “how many werewolves, banshees, kitsunes, and whatever the hell else is out there are we talking about? And what if the next cipher key uncovers not – not twelve names, but a hundred?”

“We don’t think there would be that many names. There’s a limit,” Stiles says.

“Because of the numbers,” Scott says, pointing at the list. “We think that once we decode the names, the numbers will add up to 117.”

“117 what?” Stilinski asks.

“Million,” Scott says.

Stiles turns the dead pool towards himself, grabbing a pen and scribbling down a series of *K* and *M*, denoting the value of each number. Isaac sucks in a breath when Stiles scribbles an *M* next to his own name. Eleven million.

It causes a visceral reaction. Isaac feels sick to his stomach.

Stiles caps the pen, saying, “117 million dollars, Dad. Stolen from the Hale vault and is being used by someone to finance all these murders.”

“Someone who wants every supernatural in Beacon Hills dead,” Scott says grimly.

“The Benefactor,” Stiles says.

Stilinski nods. “So, the coded list goes out, and somehow, these professional assassins *get* that list...”

“And a cipher key,” Stiles adds.

“And then they go after the names on the list – they being killers with no mouths, tomahawks, thermo-cut wires that can take your head off,” Stilinski says, volume draining as he goes.

“Wait a second. Carrie was also stabbed,” Stiles murmurs, shuffling through the crime scene photos, finding the ones that show Carrie’s neck. She’s been marked with hexagonal shapes and piercing cuts. Stiles points to it, asking, “What’s this mark?”

“We’re not sure yet. We’re still waiting on the ME’s report,” Stilinski says. Then, “There’s one other thing I don’t get. How did the new assassin know that – that Demarco was going to be at the lake house?”

“Everyone knows he delivers kegs to teenagers for a little extra cash,” Scott says. To the *sheriff*. (He’s a little bit of a dumbass.)

“Ah,” Stilinski intones, noting his disappointment, but not commenting. Instead, he stays focused on the much bigger issue. “So, whoever ordered that keg... killed Demarco.”

“Yeah, it was someone *at* the party,” Stiles says.

“A student.”

—

When Derek drives into the school parking lot, he doesn’t drop Isaac off like usual. Instead, he pulls into a spot, setting his car into park. Derek is meeting up with Scott, something about helping him with Liam. (Scott had finally caved and told Derek about his first beta after the events of the full moon.)

Derek doesn’t tell Isaac exactly what he’s doing to help, but Isaac doesn’t ask either. He’s not bothered in the slightest. All Isaac really feels is something cozy and fond flaring in his chest at the thought of Derek and Scott work so closely together. Isaac dutifully ignores the

feeling.

“Watch out for assassins,” Isaac says, just before he and Derek are about to part ways. It’s half-sincere, half-joking.

Derek scoffs, “I’ll do my best.” Then, “Hey, I’ll be back later. For the lacrosse scrimmage.”

Isaac balks. “Wait. You’re – You’re coming?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Derek says with a smile. He claps a hand on Isaac’s shoulder, and then ducks down the hallway.

Isaac is left standing there feeling like an idiot.

Derek is coming to see Isaac play lacrosse. It’s not even a real game. Isaac’s dad never once came to a game, but *Derek* is coming to a scrimmage.

This time, Isaac can’t ignore the fuzzy feeling. It fills him to the brim, spreading warmth through his veins and a smile across his face.

A random student bumps Isaac’s shoulder, spurring him back to life. He stumbles a little, finally setting into motion and walking to class, though he’s grinning all the while.

Isaac steps inside the art classroom, settling in at his usual easel. The spot next to him is empty, and will stay that way for the remainder of the period. Lydia is with Malia at the lake house, still trying to discover the next cipher key. She won’t be joining Isaac. It drops the smile from his face.

It shouldn’t be a big deal, but, surprisingly, Isaac misses Lydia’s presence. They don’t talk much during class, only little tidbits here and there, but their silence is companionable. It’s comfortable, and it helps fill the gaping void of loss.

Without Lydia here, the hole in Isaac’s chest feels even bigger. Without her there to dull the ache, Isaac feels it all around him. It’s a sticky feeling, one that clings to his skin and his lungs and his heart.

It’s everywhere. The pain is surrounding Isaac, wrapped around him in every way. Isaac feels trapped in it. He feels stuck. He feels claustrophobic.

It’s all Isaac can do to keep his breathing steady and his claws firmly

put away.

And so, when the bell rings, Isaac can't get out of the classroom quick enough. He darts out into the hallway, head hanging low, and promptly slams into Stiles.

"Isaac, what the hell!" Stiles exclaims.

"Sorry," Isaac says, though it's more bite than anything. It certainly isn't a genuine apology.

Would you accept an apology?

Isaac shakes his head, trying to dislodge Allison's voice.

"Nevermind, dude, I figured something out. We need to find Scott," Stiles says, tugging lightly on Isaac's sleeve. He doesn't touch Isaac's skin, just the loose fabric of his cardigan. Isaac doesn't know if it's a conscious decision on Stiles' part, but it's a good one, nonetheless. Sometimes, when Stiles gets like this – wrapped up in the next step, in the next plan – he can lose his critical thinking. But, maybe, some subconscious part of him has become so familiar with Isaac that, even like this, he knows better than to roughly grab Isaac without warning.

That thought, the thought of Isaac and Stiles becoming so familiar that they're beginning to ingrain each other in their instincts, it dulls the ache. It unbinds the pain clinging to Isaac's skin and lungs and heart. It fills the void. Not fully – never fully – but enough.

"Isaac?" Stiles calls, waving his hand in front of his face and giving another tug to his sleeve.

"Yeah, yeah, let's go," Isaac says, nodding.

The pair rushes through the hallway, looking for Scott. And, not unlike the other day, when they first learned about the axe murderer and triple homicide, they find Scott and Kira together.

Isaac and Stiles come to a skidding stop in front of them, and Stiles, panting, says, "It's a lacrosse stick."

Isaac is met with confusion. He quickly turns his head to look at Stiles, eyebrows drawing together. "Um. What?"

Stiles flounders, hands flying, "The – The shape. Carrie Hudson? She was stabbed, and it left a mark? Like a hexagon?"

“Yeah...” Scott says slowly, not quite understanding. Isaac doesn’t get it either.

“It’s the same exact shape as the end of a lacrosse stick,” Stiles says. “It’s a lacrosse player.”

The realization hits.

“The killer’s on the team,” Scott breathes.

The reveal brings with it a whole new level of creepy. Sure, the idea of the killer being a student felt a little too close for comfort, but it’s a big school with hundreds of students. There was still a sense of anonymity. In fact, Isaac doesn’t even know the majority of the student body’s names.

But, he does know every single lacrosse player’s name.

“Okay, so what do we do?” Kira asks.

All eyes turn to Stiles. His eyebrows dart up, mouth opening and closing. “Uhh... Equipment! We check equipment.”

And so, that’s what they do. The four of them hide out in Coach’s office, starting to examine every lacrosse stick they can get their hands on. They uncap the ends, look inside for a concealed weapon, and toss the safe sticks on the tables. The equipment quickly piles up. There’s at least a dozen lacrosse sticks already checked, and each one is empty. It’s a futile effort, and they all know it.

“This... This is pointless,” Scott says, throwing down another stick. “Most of the team plays with their own gear.”

It’s true. Isaac uses the school equipment, but there are only a few other students who do the same.

“Maybe instead of trying to find a lacrosse stick with a hidden dagger in it, we should be trying to get the game canceled?” Kira suggests.

It might be the safest option, but it’s not the smartest. Getting the game canceled would only delay the inevitable attack. Right now, they actually have an advantage. They don’t know who the killer is, but they know when he’s mostly likely to strike. That gives them an opportunity to act.

Sharing the sentiment, Scott says, “The game is the best way to catch

him red-handed.”

“But what if he’s red-handed ‘cause his hands are covered in the blood of the person that he just stabbed to death?” Stiles rambles. Then, he points between Isaac and Scott, “Which, by the way, could be either of you guys... And, probably Kira, too.”

“Or Liam...” Scott says, contemplative. “We don’t have the full list and he could be on it.”

Scott feels responsible for everyone’s safety. That much has always been clear. He carries the weight of the world on his shoulders, like it’s on him to protect everyone. Not just because he has the power to do so, but because he cares enough that he wants to.

But this... this thing with Liam, it’s more than altruism. Scott turned Liam. If Liam is on the dead pool, it’s because of Scott. It doesn’t matter that Scott only bit Liam to save his life, it doesn’t matter that he never intended to bite anyone. The damage has been done. And, now, Scott will do whatever it takes to keep Liam safe. There’s an unbreakable bond between an alpha and their beta. Liam, more than anyone else, really is Scott’s responsibility.

“We don’t know *anything* about that list. How it’s made, how it’s updated,” Stiles says, trying to alleviate some of Scott’s worries. “I mean, who’s been out taking a supernatural census anyway?”

“We barely knew what Lydia was until a few months ago. How do they know about her?” Isaac asks. It makes sense that the creator of the list would know about Derek, and Scott, and even Isaac. But there are people on that list that *no one* knew about. It doesn’t make sense.

“They know about everyone,” Scott says, and it does seem to be true.

Stiles sighs, “I think Kira’s right. I think we should stop the game.”

Scott shakes his head. “I’m not afraid.”

Isaac looks at him. He sees the fierce determination and the truth in the statement. It floods Isaac’s bones, filling him with his own sense of certainty. His name might be on a supernatural hit list, he might be worth eleven million dollars dead, but it doesn’t feel so scary if Scott is on his side. If they’re all together, nothing seems unbeatable.

“If you want to do this, I’m with you,” Isaac says.

Kira nods, giving easily, “Me too.”

“Well, I’m not! I’m terrified and I’m not even on the list!” Stiles exclaims. “Guys, these are *professional* killers. It’s their *profession!*” Stiles keeps going, but Isaac is still watching Scott. He’s hardly paying attention as Stiles throws his arms out, “One of them’s got a thermo-cut wire that cuts heads off. Who knows what else they have?”

Scott’s hanging his head, neck tilted slightly to the side. He’s listening intently, but it’s not Stiles he’s listening to.

“Scott?” Isaac asks, voice pitched low.

“It’s Liam,” Scott says, looking up. “Something’s wrong.”

He doesn’t waste a second before sprinting out the door, giving Isaac no choice but to follow. Isaac weaves through the halls, ducking between passing students without care for who he runs into. Scott is just up ahead, but Isaac has to work to keep up, squeezing through tight gaps with rushed agility.

Scott bursts through a pair of double doors, leaving Isaac’s field of vision as he disappears into the schoolyard. Isaac races to keep up, following him out into the glaring sun. Isaac’s eyes quickly readjust, and he sees Scott coming to a halt just beyond a crowd of students.

Isaac slides to stop next to Scott (with Stiles lagging a handful of seconds behind), and assesses the situation. A Devenford Prep bus is parked in the lot, lacrosse players pouring out onto the grounds of Beacon Hills High School.

And, there, in the middle of it all, is Liam.

“I just wanted to say,” Liam starts, chest heaving with the weight of his breath. Isaac can practically smell his anger from here. He’s waiting for an outburst, for an explosion, but all Liam does is stick out his hand and finish with, “Have a good game.”

Isaac is on the verge of relief, but then, the Devenford player across from Liam starts laughing, mean and mocking. “That’s cute, Liam,” he says. “Is that what they told you to say in Anger Management? Apologize, and everything’s fine?”

Liam’s anger twists, turning to something more. More confused, more embarrassed.

The other player still doesn't stop there, though. He takes a small step closer, and adds, "You *demolished* Coach's car."

Liam speaks through gritted teeth, "I paid for it."

"Yeah, you're gonna pay for it," the Devenford player threatens. "We're gonna break you in half out there. And it's gonna be *all... your... fault.*"

Then, there's blood dripping from Liam's palm.

"Oh, shit," Scott whispers. He's noticed it too. He darts forward with Isaac and Stiles hot on his heels.

"Whoa, whoa, hey," Scott rambles, wrapping an arm around Liam's shoulder and forcing him back a few paces. Isaac is on Liam's other side, firm hand planted on his bicep.

Meanwhile, Stiles does what he does best. He talks.

"Hey! What's going on prep students? Welcome to our little public high school. How you doing? Stiles," he introduces himself, holding his hand out and aiming for a handshake. But, same as with Liam, the player ignores him. Stiles takes it in stride, saying, "That's a firm handshake you got there. Uh, we're very excited for the scrimmage tonight. Uh, but let's keep it clean, all right? No rough stuff out there. All right, see you on the field."

Then, Stiles turns, gesturing back towards the school with a quietly urgent, "Go."

With the situation successfully deescalated, they make their escape. The three of them usher Liam into the locker room, moving as quickly and casually as they can. Liam might not have given into the urge to punch that prep student in the face, but he's still lost to the anger. It's gotten a grip on him, taking him hostage and depriving him of control.

Scott was right about the anger making Liam difficult, but it's not just that. It makes him stronger too.

"Liam!" Scott bellows, eyes just starting to tint red, but it doesn't have the desired effect. Unlike with Isaac, Scott's voice doesn't even seem to touch Liam. It does nothing to center his control or suppress the shift. Liam just keeps fighting.

They shove him further into the locker room, pressing Liam against the shower wall. In a moment of pure instinct and maybe a little genius, Isaac reaches out and turns the dial. Instantly, a spray of water jets out, dousing them in a shock of cold.

In a matter of seconds, they're all drenched and dripping, but Liam isn't giving up. His claws and fangs remain extended, continuing to struggle against their efforts to contain him. He gets his back pushed up off the wall, lunging forward.

"Okay, you calm yet?" Stiles yells.

Liam just roars in response.

Isaac and Scott share a look. Then, together, with all their combined strength, they slam Liam against the wall. They push him directly under the spray of water, soaking him to the bone.

And, eventually, Liam tires. He wrestles to avoid the stream of the shower, panting, "Okay, okay."

They shut the water off and release Liam. He staggers, fangs and claws receding as he slumps against the nearest wall. He slides down to the ground.

"That car you smashed, I thought you said it was your teacher's?" Scott says with a question in his inflection, but accusation in his eyes.

"He was also my coach," Liam admits. "He benched me for the entire season."

"What did you do?" Scott asks.

Liam peers up at Scott. Down on the floor like this, wet through and breathing heavy, Liam looks even younger than usual. He mumbles, "I got a couple red cards..."

"Just a couple?" Stiles goads.

Liam turns his gaze over to Stiles, but he doesn't respond. He's twiddling his fingers, avoiding the question, avoiding the truth. He's nervous, Isaac realizes. Even after the trip under the shower spray, he still smells embarrassed, which means he's still feeling it now.

Scott crouches down, making level eye contact with Liam. Isaac watches Scott instead of Liam, trying to ease the vulnerability of the

moment and alleviate some of the pressure he must be feeling.

"You gotta be honest with us," Scott says. Then, firm, but not angry, "What else happened?"

"Nothing," Liam defends, a little impatient. It's enough of the truth that his heartbeat doesn't change. "I got kicked out of school... They sent me to a psychologist for an evaluation."

"What did they call it?" Scott asks.

"Intermittent Explosive Disorder," Liam says, sounding out the words like he isn't familiar with saying the diagnosis aloud.

"I.E.D.?" Stiles repeats, incredulous. "You're literally an I.E.D.? That's great."

Isaac knows it's purely reactionary. He knows Stiles would never really make fun of someone for something so personal. He knows Stiles is only acting out of fear and concern for the safety of Scott, himself, the general public, maybe even Liam. But, still, Isaac notices the flicker of hurt dancing in Liam's eyes and the edges of his scent.

Scott basically ignores Stiles, keeping his focus on Liam. "Did they give you anything for it?"

"Risperdal," Liam says, avoiding eye contact. "It's an antipsychotic."

"Oh, this just keeps getting better," Stiles mutters sarcastically.

Isaac knows Stiles isn't being purposely cruel, knows he can only cope with terrible humor, but he doesn't like the kicked puppy look on Liam's face. So, he shoots Stiles a nasty glare and hisses, "Would you shut up?"

Stiles grimaces, face contorting into a teasing kind of annoyance. Isaac just rolls his eyes.

"But I don't take it," Liam says. His voice turns a little sad, like he's frustrated, "I can't play lacrosse on it. It makes me too tired."

"Okay," Scott says quietly. His mind is racing, Isaac can see his wheels turning. "I think you should bail out of the game. Tell Coach your leg is still hurting."

"No, no!" Liam protests at once. He moves to his feet and Scott follows. Liam speaks with conviction, "I can do this."

Isaac wants to have faith in him, but Liam has been a werewolf all of five minutes. He isn't ready.

Then, softer, Liam adds, "Especially if you're there."

Stiles buries his face in his hands, but Isaac just smiles. Liam might have a tough road ahead of him, even more so with the dead pool surfacing, but he has Scott to guide him. He's going to be okay because they're going to help him learn control. *Scott* is going to help him.

"But, Liam, it's not just about the game," Scott says, looking over at Isaac and Stiles, then back to Liam. He confesses, "We *think* whoever killed Demarco might be on our team."

"Who's Demarco?" Liam asks, squinting. He's so out of their league.

"The one who brought the beer to the party," Stiles says. He waves his hand around his face, "Y'know, the guy who was beheaded. Remember?"

"We think the person who ordered the keg killed Demarco," Scott explains.

Liam goes quiet. His head tips forward, eyes downcast and flicking back and forth in fast motions. There's something in the movement that indicates recognition.

"Liam?" Scott asks, voice testing and low. "What, you know something?"

Liam lifts his eyes, head shaking minutely. "I don't know who ordered the keg," he glances at Isaac, "but I know who paid for it."

"Who?" Stiles implores.

Liam turns to face Stiles. Then, "Garrett."

—

Isaac sits on a bench along the side of the field. The sun has set and the game is about to begin, but, when Isaac checks the stands, Derek is nowhere to be found. Isaac tries not to let it worry him. Derek is probably just running late or decided not to come. He definitely didn't get attacked by assassins.

(Isaac also tries not to indulge the hurt he feels at the thought of

Derek deciding not to come. It's only a scrimmage. It's not important.)

Scott slides onto the bench beside Isaac, "Hey."

"Hi," Isaac responds.

Scott is looking out over the field, scouring for signs of threat. Isaac should probably be doing the same, but he's not. Instead, he's observing Scott. There's a question lingering at the back of his mind, pulling his focus and causing a swirl of emotions. It's confusion, mostly.

Isaac hesitates, then, "Why didn't your voice work on Liam like it does on me?"

Scott turns his head, meeting Isaac's eyes. He pauses for a moment, eyebrows pulled together just slightly, like he's really thinking about it. Eventually, he says, "I... I don't know."

Isaac frowns. That definitely wasn't the response he was hoping for, but, before Isaac can press the subject any further, Kira joins them. She falls into the spot next to Scott, asking in a hushed tone, "Shouldn't we do something now?"

She glances over her shoulder, directing Isaac's attention towards Garrett. He's sitting with some of the other freshmen, laughing and chatting jovially. He certainly doesn't look very threatening.

"I mean, we can't," Scott says. "We're still not really sure if it's really him. And if we're wrong, then the real assassin gets away."

Scott's right. They can't risk it. This is their one chance to catch the assassin in action. They have to at least try.

Isaac's phone buzzes, distracting him from the current conversation. It's a text from Derek: **Running late. Checking on something with Argent, but I'll be there.**

Isaac begins typing out a message, attempting to explain the situation at hand, but then Coach starts yelling, "Let's go! Get your asses out on the field!"

Isaac has no choice but to return his phone in his bag, message left unfinished and unsent.

Isaac zips his duffel, quickly closing the distance between himself and

Stiles and Kira, standing with them on the sidelines. They watch as Scott tries to convince Coach to sit Liam out of the game.

“As captain,” Scott is saying, “I’m suggesting Liam sit out the game.”

All his efforts earn him is an incredulous chuckle from Coach, followed by, “And as, uh, President of the United States, I’m vetoing that suggestion.”

“What if he gets hurt?” Scott asks, but any argument is completely undermined by what happens next.

The tall, cocky Devenford Prep player from before shouts, “Hey, Liam! Think fast!”

Then, he wings a lacrosse ball right at Liam who catches it with the ease of werewolf reflexes.

“Oh, he plays,” Coach says, putting an end to the discussion. He starts slow clapping, chanting in a monotone voice, “There you go, Liam! Liam! Stilinski! McCall! Lahey!”

And then, the game begins.

In the first play, the Devenford players get control of the ball without much difficulty. The same tall, cocky player – whose jersey reads *Talbot 28* – scores. There’s an eruption of cheers and groans from the stands.

Isaac rallies with Scott, Stiles, and Kira in the middle of the field with the latter saying, “Why do I feel like this is going to end badly?”

“Because it usually does,” Stiles snarks.

“Kira and Isaac, you keep an eye on Garrett. I’ll watch out for Liam,” Scott says, doling out instructions like more than just their team captain.

As the group starts to disperse again, Stiles calls out, “Yeah, I’m just gonna try to play... lacrosse.”

Isaac turns, looking Stiles up and down, “Yeah, and good luck with that.”

“If I could flip you off in these gloves, I would!” Stiles yells to Isaac’s retreating form.

Isaac ignores him in favor of focusing on the game. The next play starts, and, once again, Talbot gets the ball. Liam charges down the field, immediately getting tackled by not one, but two of the biggest guys on the other team. He's sent sprawling onto his back as Talbot scores again.

Liam moves swiftly to his feet, throwing his helmet and gloves to the side. He prepares to launch at the two players, making to attack them, but Isaac and Scott are quick to intervene. They grab Liam, holding him back even as he continues to push forward with a teeth-bared growl. His canines haven't sharpened yet, but if he doesn't get a handle on his anger, they will soon.

Liam breaks free of their hold. He's breathless and the anger in his chemosignals is still sickeningly strong, but he's not trying to lunge again. And so, with the crisis momentarily averted, Isaac's eyes dart around the field, trying to keep tabs on Garrett.

When Isaac finds him, he's standing just a few feet away, and he's already watching them.

Isaac blows out a puff of air. This is definitely going to end badly.

—

The game starts up again. Surprisingly, Stiles actually manages to get the ball, passing it directly into the pocket of Kira's stick. It's purely coincidental luck on Stiles' part, but the little cheer he gives still manages to make Isaac smile.

Then, Isaac runs past Kira, maneuvering between players to get down to the end of the field. He makes himself available closer to the goal, just waiting for the play to be called.

"Pass it!" Coach calls out like clockwork. But Kira isn't listening, even as Coach repeats, "Kira, pass the ball!"

Kira completely ignores the instructions, getting caught up in what Isaac can only assume is first game excitement. She rushes by Isaac, spins through the air, and shoots the ball. It hits the back of the net with a resounding clamor from the bleachers. Kira jumps for joy, celebrating her personal victory.

"Yukimura!" Coach yells, irritation evident in his tone. "Get over here!"

Isaac knows what's about to happen.

Kira jogs over, smile spread across her face, but it doesn't last long. Coach wipes it clean off with a simple, "Take a seat. You're benched for the rest of the game."

"What? Why?" Kira asks, bewildered.

"You didn't pass," Coach says.

"I had an open shot!" Kira counters, and Isaac sort of wants to roll his eyes, but he doesn't. He understands Kira's enthusiasm, he really does. It's her first game, and she's always been a little overeager. She got swept up in the moment, and, usually, it would be a harmless mistake. But not tonight. Tonight, she's left Isaac alone on the field as the only one watching out for Garrett.

"The play was for you to pass," Coach says, and he's probably being a little too harsh on her, but there's nothing Isaac can really do about that. "This is a scrimmage. It's about *teamwork*, Yukimura. So, you're benched."

Kira turns to look at Scott, appearing properly subdued and apologetic, but the line has already been drawn in the sand. She can't amend her mistake, and, now, they're paying her price.

Then, Isaac watches as Kira stalks over to the sit out bench. That's when he spots Derek.

There, on the bleachers, nestled among the crowd of high schoolers and parents, is Derek Hale. As soon as he realizes he's caught Isaac's eye, Derek flashes a thumbs up and a smile. It's a small gesture, but it floods Isaac with motivation. Isaac wants so badly to make Derek proud.

"Is that Derek?" Stiles' voice comes from Isaac's right, pulling his focus away from the stands. Stiles is looking between Derek and Isaac like he just won the lottery. "Oh my god. He's here to see you play, isn't he?"

"Shut up, Stilinski," Isaac grumbles. He knows he's flushing with embarrassment, but he doesn't even care. Derek actually came. He came to see Isaac play.

Derek's arrival gives Isaac a much needed boost. It gives him confidence and a sense of purpose. Isaac is going to play his heart out,

and he's going to stop Garrett in the process.

The game recommences, and Isaac is raring to go. He's so full of determination, but, in the end, it doesn't matter. Because, just as soon as the game picks up again, it comes to a crashing stop. Literally.

There's a collision at the other end of the field. Liam's familiar cries reach Isaac's ears. His voice is imbued with agony that makes Isaac's skin crawl. He wants to cover his ears to the sound, but he doesn't. Instead, he runs towards the noise, right up to the scene of the accident.

Liam and Talbot are both collapsed on the field, releasing twin whimpers of pain. Coach is barking out orders, but Isaac isn't listening. His attention is on Liam and helping Scott bring him to his feet. Once he's upright, Liam can stand just fine on his own, but he hasn't healed yet. His pain is still present, evident in his sharp inhales and labored exhales.

"How hard did you hit him?" Scott asks.

"I didn't," Liam pants. "He hit me."

Liam holds out his left arm, revealing the source of his pain. His forearm is visibly broken, bone jutting out, but still trapped underneath the surface of his skin. The good thing is: it's a clean break, one that they can fix. Right here, right now.

"Oh," Stiles complains, turning away from the sight with unveiled disgust.

Scott quickly rips off his gloves, gently taking hold of Liam's injured arm. He breathes deeply, greeting Liam with a regretful look, and says, "Close your eyes."

Liam's eyes fall shut. Then, with a nauseating crunch and a cry from Liam, Scott sets the bone back into place. Liam is still panting, but his healing kicks in straight away and the pain fades from his scent.

The same can't be said for Talbot. The ref and one of his teammates are supporting his weight, basically carrying him off the field. He groans and whines as he goes, but his noises are overshadowed by one much more chilling. It's the distinct sound of metal sliding against metal.

The sound of a dagger retracting.

Immediately, Scott starts checking over Liam's arm for any signs of further injury, asking, "Are you – Are you cut? Did Garrett cut you?"

"No," Liam says with conviction. "No, no. I'm okay."

Scott pivots away from Liam, gaze trailing over to Garrett. He's standing there, lacrosse stick in hand and staring at them with intent.

For now, Liam is unharmed, but, in an instant, it's all become clear.

"Then he missed," Scott says with a rush of relief and a hint of doubt.

"What do you mean?" Liam asks, trying to meet Scott's eyes.

Scott looks around, eyes flickering in every direction. He takes a step closer. Then, he reveals, "It's you, Liam. You're the one he's after."

—

There's commotion all around as the coaches, referees, and players assess how to move forward with the rest of the scrimmage. Meanwhile, Isaac and the other pack members have a far more pressing matter to consider: how to move forward in their assassination resistance.

"I talked to Coach," Liam says, rejoining the group at the edge of the field. "I'm out for the rest of the game."

It brings a little comfort, but not much,

Kira turns to Scott, "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Scott admits. "Something's still not right, we're missing something."

Isaac feels it too. Presumably, Garrett missed, but he isn't acting like someone who just made a potentially million dollar mistake. He's still smug, still assured and confident. He isn't acting like someone who just failed. It doesn't make sense.

"Guys," Stiles hustles over, stress in his voice and phone in his hand. "Lydia just broke another third of the list."

"Am I on it?" Liam asks.

Stiles pauses briefly, mouth open and head tilting. "No, but someone else is."

Stiles holds out his phone.

Kate Argent 12
Noshiko Yukimura 5
Steve Grace 500
Tom Hill 500
Brett Talbot 1
Kira Yukimura 6
Reed Schall 250
Richard Benefield 250
Jack Marsland 250
Joy Waldrop 250
Cheryl Calix 250
Jordan Parrish 5

There, amongst a slew of other names – both foreign and familiar – is a single name that stands out above the noise. A name that Isaac has seen plastered on a jersey all night.

Brett Talbot.

Garrett didn't miss. His target wasn't Liam. It was Brett.

Scott doesn't even blink. He just takes off running in the direction of the school. Isaac is ready to follow, left heel already lifting off the ground, when his path is blocked. Derek steps in front of him, grabbing his forearm and refusing to let him slip past. Still, Isaac is peering over and around Derek's wide shoulders, trying desperately and unsuccessfully to get a glimpse of Scott's fleeting form.

"Isaac," the word comes firm, forcing his attention. Isaac stops trying to flee, knowing this will move faster if he complies. When he does, Derek's grip on his arm softens along with his voice, "This isn't just a lacrosse game. Is it?"

"No," Isaac sighs. "One of the players on our team is an assassin."

Derek gapes, letting go of Isaac completely. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was trying to, but then the game started and there – there just wasn't enough time," Isaac fumbles. There isn't enough time right now either. Scott just ran into danger, and Isaac needs to go after him. He needs to help him. So, he rushes through to the remainder of the explanation, "Lydia broke the next third of the dead pool."

"With Aiden's name, by the way," Stiles cuts in, adding to the

conversation. Then, he dips his head in the direction of the school, and says, "Come on, we need to go."

Isaac nods. He, Stiles, and Derek run towards the school, racing against the clock. They shove through the double doors, peeling down the hallway and coming to a stumbling stop just outside the locker room.

There are two bodies on the ground.

Orphaned

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 4 episode 6

Word count: 8,442

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Brett is convulsing on the metal table of Beacon Hills Animal Clinic. There's a yellow, syrupy substance pooling at his lips and splattering across the room as he jerks in their hold. Isaac presses down hard on one of Brett's shoulders while Derek and Stiles are on the other, but it's no use. They can barely restrain him.

"What the hell is happening to this kid?" Stiles exclaims.

"He's been poisoned by a rare form of wolfsbane," Deaton says, rounding the table with a scalpel. "I need to make an incision, and you need to hold him as still as possible."

Isaac has Brett's left side almost entirely contained, pinning him to the table with all his strength. On the other side, Stiles and Derek aren't having the same luck. Even with both their weight pushing on Brett's shoulder, he continues to jostle against them.

Stiles' eyes flick from Derek to Isaac to Brett, then, "Hey, Derek, how 'bout a little werewolf strength?"

"Yeah, I'm not the only one here with werewolf strength," Derek bites out, clearly frustrated and obviously struggling.

He shouldn't be. He should be able to hold Brett down with ease, especially with Stiles' help. And yet, Brett is still thrashing.

"If you can't hold him still, the incision might kill him," Deaton orders.

Isaac uses more force. He allows one of his hands to slip over Brett's chest, trying to distribute his strength more evenly and restrict him from the center. It would have worked, if not for the sweat coating Brett's skin. Isaac loses his hold just a little, and that's all it takes.

“I think he’s slipping! I don’t think I can hold him,” Stiles calls out.

Then, Brett’s eyes flash a golden yellow. His arms slide out of their hold, reaching up to shove them away. Isaac stumbles backwards, slamming against the metal supply cart. He hears Stiles’ groan of pain from across the room, but his focus is on Brett. He staggers off the table, lips painted chartreuse and skin slick with perspiration. He’s wild, neck turning and full body spinning.

He’s confused and scared and he’s looking for an exit.

Isaac reorients himself before Brett can flee. Brett’s moving past Isaac, making for the front door, but Isaac stops him in his tracks. He does the only thing he can think of doing, and punches Brett in the face. Hard.

The yellow liquid sprays from Brett’s mouth, sprinkling across the stone floor of the animal clinic. Then, Brett joins the droplets, crumpling to the ground. His eyes fade from gold to green-ish blue. He falls unconscious.

Only then does Isaac look up from Brett’s body. The rest of the group are staring at him, waiting for him to say something, but Isaac doesn’t. His now blue eyes are drawn to Derek’s forearm. There’s a scratch down the length of it, identical lines from three sharp claws dragged through his skin.

Derek isn’t healing.

Well, he is. It’s just slow. The scratch should have disappeared by now, and yet, the blood is bright red and the scent of it is tickling Isaac’s nose. This shouldn’t be happening.

At first, Isaac assumed the change in Derek’s eye color was because of Kate, but he’s not so sure anymore. Isaac has only seen glimpses of it: Derek’s poor reflexes when Isaac threw his shoe at him, his inability to smell the blood at the high school, and, now, his limited strength and slow healing. Isaac has only seen glimpses, but the implications are clear.

Something is happening to Derek’s powers.

Before Isaac can think on it any longer, Stiles is saying, a little frantic, “Hey, Doc? I don’t think he’s breathing.”

Deaton and Stiles scramble to the floor, getting closer to Brett’s prone

form, but Isaac stays standing. He's still watching Derek.

Derek looks at Isaac. They make quick contact before Derek not at all subtly pulls his eyes away. He glances down at his injury. Isaac follows his gaze, scanning Derek's arm as the scratch very slowly fades from a bright red to a dull pink.

"Hey, Isaac, get down here in case he wakes up again," Stiles commands.

Isaac complies, crouching to his knees. He remains on standby, observing as Deaton brings the scalpel to the top of Brett's chest, just below the hollow of his neck. Then, Deaton pierces his skin.

Immediately, Brett starts to wheeze and grunt, strained sounds escaping from his throat. The noises don't stop Deaton, though. He just keeps dragging the scalpel all the way down to Brett's sternum in a clean, straight line. As the knife penetrates the skin, a puff of yellow smoke releases from the wound. It pours out into the air around them, slowly dissipating and fading into nothing.

The wound closes and Brett falls still and quiet.

"Is he okay?" Stiles asks.

"I think he'll be fine, but probably out for a while," Deaton says.

Isaac notices that the faint scent of blood has vanished from the room. It might have only been overpowered by the thick, cloying scent of wolfsbane, but, still, Isaac has to check. When he does, he sees Derek's arm has finally healed all the way through. Derek seems to breathe a sigh of relief.

"Guys, can you hear that?" Stiles asks, looking up and around at the group. "I think he's saying something."

Once again, Isaac's attention is pulled away from Derek and directed over to Brett. Isaac leans in a little closer. Brett's still not conscious, but he's whispering, "The sun... the moon... the truth," and again, "the sun... the moon... the truth."

Isaac sees recognition flash in Deaton's eyes, and asks, "What does it mean?"

"Three things cannot long be hidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth," Deaton recites. He turns his head, relaying the next words to

Derek, "It's Buddhist."

Realization washes over Derek, glinting in his green eyes. He says, "Satomi."

Stiles' eyes flick up to Derek, appearing startled and a little exasperated. "The werewolf who started the riot that killed Rhys and caused Noshiko to summon the nogitsune? *That* Satomi?"

Isaac can hear a small quiver in his voice on the word 'nogitsune,' but he doesn't mention it.

"She's different now," Deaton says calmly. "She's an alpha. She's learned control. *And* she has a pack."

"One that's probably listed on the dead pool without even knowing," Derek adds, voice almost apologetic.

Stiles sighs. Isaac eyes him closely, waiting to see what he's going to say or do. Isaac is expecting some sort of outburst. That's usually how Stiles reacts to someone he doesn't trust.

Not this time, though. This time, Stiles stays quiet.

"Isaac and I can go looking for the pack tomorrow," Derek says, pushing through the tension that has started to creep its way into the room's atmosphere.

Stiles still seems far away, like he's lost in his head. Isaac has a sinking feeling he's reliving some of his horror at this very moment, though he gives no indication of it. Instead, Stiles just nods, and says, "Lydia and I are going to try to crack the last third of the dead pool." As an afterthought, he adds, "And, also, figure out why the hell *Parrish* is on the list."

After that, there's not much else they can say or do. Brett is stabilized, but he won't be awake for a while. So, at least for tonight, he's staying under Deaton's care at the animal clinic. Isaac, Derek, and Stiles have their marching orders set for tomorrow, but, for now, all they can really do is go home.

And so, the three of them exit the animal clinic. Stiles branches off towards his Jeep and Derek heads for his own car, but Isaac takes pause. He stands between the two, fumbling for a moment.

"Isaac? You coming?" Derek asks from a few paces away.

“Uh... One second,” Isaac says, holding up a finger to mean, *wait*.

Derek nods, and Isaac starts moving again. He lets his long legs carry him to Stiles, easily bridging the gap between them. When Stiles is only a foot away and about to reach the Jeep, Isaac calls, only loud enough to gain his attention, “Hey, Stiles, hold on.”

Stiles comes to a halt, spinning around. Isaac walks up to him, not invading Stiles’ personal space, but getting close enough that it feels like a private conversation. (Though, if Derek’s sense of smell is fading, then his hearing probably is too. Isaac purposely ignores that thought, not allowing it to derail his focus.)

Isaac stands in front of Stiles and asks, “Are you okay?”

Stiles, caught off guard, flounders. His mouth opens and closes, his hands come together in two fists over his stomach, and the scent of anxiety radiates off him.

Stiles doesn’t say anything, so Isaac adds, “I know you don’t trust Satomi but... you trust me and Derek, don’t you?”

“I definitely don’t trust Derek,” Stiles huffs, heart stuttering in his chest.

“You’re lying,” Isaac says, not caring about being brusque.

Stiles shrugs, like the truth doesn’t matter. He just says, “I’m *fine*, Isaac. Seriously.”

He’s still lying, but Isaac knows they can’t really get into it right now, even if he does want to. Isaac wants to help, but the circumstances won’t allow it. It’s hard, knowing that Stiles is suffering when they don’t have the time to dwell on it. They don’t have the time to give Stiles the dedicated care and attention he needs.

And so, Isaac just says, “All right.”

“All right,” Stiles repeats. Then, “Be careful tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I will,” Isaac says, nodding.

The conversation draws to a close, and Isaac rejoins Derek in his car. Isaac isn’t feeling much better after the brief exchange, but maybe Stiles will realize Isaac is paying attention. Maybe he’ll realize Isaac is someone he can turn to. Maybe then, Isaac can help.

Derek doesn't say anything to Isaac until they're both in the car and the doors have closed. Then, he asks, "He okay?"

"Not really," Isaac says. "But neither is anyone else."

Isaac doesn't bring it up until they're back at the loft. Though, once they are inside, he doesn't wait very long. Derek is entering the makeshift kitchen (well, the only thing it's really missing now is a dishwasher – Isaac made Derek buy a toaster when he moved in) when Isaac blurts, "When were you going to tell me?"

Derek pauses. The hand reaching out for the fridge handle drops slowly back down to his side. He pivots. At first, Derek doesn't meet Isaac's eyes, just keeps looking down at his arm and tracing over the spot where Brett's scratch once was. He runs the blunt nail of his thumb over the skin, watching as it blooms pink for just a second before the mark fades.

Then, Derek lifts his eyes, and says, "When I knew for certain."

"And do you?" Isaac asks. His arms are crossed over his chest, head tilted slightly to the side. His posture might suggest it, but he's not angry. Really, he's just concerned.

Derek nods. "Originally, I thought my eyes changed because of part of my past. But then, everything else started to change too..." Derek takes a deep breath. "I think I'm losing my power."

Isaac bites down on his surprise. He shouldn't be surprised at all. This is exactly what he thought was happening. Still, a theory and actual confirmation are two very different things.

For Derek's sake, Isaac stays level, asking, "And that's why you hired Braeden to find Kate?"

"Yeah," Derek says, hushed. "Whatever she did to me, it's still happening."

Isaac nods, "Okay."

"Okay?" Derek questions.

"Okay, we'll figure this out," Isaac clarifies, speaking with conviction.

Derek's eyebrows furrow, like he doesn't trust Isaac's demeanor.

“That’s it? No panic?”

Isaac understands Derek’s skepticism, understands why he would be expecting panic, but Isaac really is calm. Derek might be losing his powers, but it’s not the worst thing in the world. Derek isn’t headed straight for the grave, he’s just becoming human. Sure, that means he can’t defend himself as well, but he has Isaac to save his ass. They already decided that.

So, Isaac shrugs, “I mean it’s not great, definitely an inconvenience, but it’s not the worst that could happen.”

Derek’s expression falls into a glare, “Don’t say that. You’re just testing fate.”

Isaac smiles, “*You* believe in fate?”

It’s Derek’s turn to shrug. “How else are you going to explain us coming together?”

Isaac’s eyes go wide, and then he’s pretending to gag, saying, “Ew, Derek. That’s disgusting.”

They both know he’s lying.

—

It’s been a long night, but Isaac isn’t ready to put it to rest yet. He has to call Scott first. He *wants* to call Scott first. He likes their little routine. It brings him a sense of comfort and belonging.

By the time Isaac turns in for the night, it’s late enough that Scott is most likely home from that disaster of a lacrosse game. So, Isaac dials his number, and then he waits.

“*Hey, Isaac,*” Scott picks up after the fourth ring. “*I wasn’t sure if you wanted to talk tonight or else I would’ve called, like, an hour ago.*”

“That’s okay, we only just got wrapped up here,” Isaac says. He’s sitting in bed, staring at the brick wall in front of him with one hand holding his phone and the other playing with the worn hem of a t-shirt Isaac is pretty sure he stole from Derek. (Or it could have been Boyd’s, but Isaac tries not to think about that.)

“*Stiles texted me that Brett was okay,*” Scott says.

“Yeah, he is,” Isaac confirms. “Deaton managed to remove the poison.

He's still knocked out and probably will be for a while, but he's okay. He's staying at the animal clinic for now."

"Good," Scott says. Isaac can feel the relief in his voice.

"Brett's part of a pack," Isaac says. Then, recalling the key detail, "Satomi's."

"*The Buddhists?*" Scott asks.

"Mhm," Isaac hums. "Derek and I are going to look for them tomorrow, so I won't be at school." (There's an opportunity for Isaac to mention Derek's dwindling powers. He doesn't.)

"Okay, cool," Scott says. "*Be extra careful tomorrow, okay? Violet got taken into custody, but Garrett is still out there... My dad said they're called The Orphans. Apparently, they're responsible for over a dozen murders across the country.*"

"Jesus," Isaac breathes. "Anything else?"

There's a break in the conversation, like Scott is thinking. He quietly clicks his tongue against the back of his teeth. "*No. No, I don't think so.*"

Scott's voice has dipped in volume, sounding almost sad. Isaac doesn't like it. "What's wrong?"

Scott makes a soft noise in the back of his throat, and Isaac has a feeling that, if he could see Scott, his expression would be one of quiet surprise. Still, Scott stutters, "*Um. It's just. Well...*" He trails off. Isaac can hear his breathing through the phone, air coming out a little heavy, a little labored. Eventually, Scott says, "*It's Liam.*"

"Is he okay?" Isaac asks, eyebrows drawn together in confusion.

"*For now,*" Scott says hopelessly. It's an unfamiliar shade of Scott's voice, one Isaac has only heard on a handful of occasions. He sighs, "*I – You know I didn't choose to be bitten like you did. And neither did Liam but... it's too late. We're in it now, and I can't go back. He's my beta, whether I wanted him to be or not. And now...*"

"You feel responsible?" Isaac asks, trying to understand what Scott is saying.

"Well, yeah. But, it's more than that," Scott says. "*It's like... There's*

nothing I can do. I feel so powerless. I want so badly for things to be different for him. I don't want him to have to worry about being hunted like I did, but, now, his name is probably on a hit list. And I... I just don't want him to have to worry about dying."

"But you saved his life," Isaac says reasonably. "If you didn't bite him, he wouldn't've had to worry about dying because he'd already be dead."

There's a small exhale on the other line, almost like a laugh. *"I forgot how blunt you can be sometimes."* The words make Isaac smile. He's about to say something when Scott speaks, voice turned solemn again, *"But what if I already sealed his fate? What if all I did was delay the inevitable?"*

(Do all werewolves believe in fate?)

"Okay, think about it this way," Isaac says, trying to help Scott find a healthier perspective. "If you were Liam, wouldn't you want to be saved? Wouldn't you want a little extra time to live your life to the fullest? Wouldn't you want a chance to at least try and change your fate?"

Scott doesn't answer his questions, but Isaac doesn't mind. They were rhetorical anyway. Instead, Scott digs a little deeper. *"Is that what you've been doing? Trying to change your fate?"* He asks, *"Is that why you accepted the bite?"*

"I guess," Isaac says, pulling a little harder at the hem of his shirt. He hadn't thought about it that way before. He's been categorizing his acceptance of the bite as an act of cowardice, but maybe it's not that simple. Maybe it was bravery. Maybe it was both, a mixture of fear and courage.

"Isn't the whole point of fate that it's set in stone and can't be changed?"

"Maybe," Isaac says, shuffling in his bed. He squirms lower, moving to rest with his head on his pillow and his eyes fixed on the ceiling. He adds, "But that's a pretty passive way to live. You have to at least pretend you have control. Otherwise, you'll stop trying. And we have to try, it's our greatest power."

"You're pretty smart, you know that?" Scott says, some of his usual levity rejoining the discussion.

Isaac scoffs, "Yeah, I have my moments. Just – If you don't want Liam

to die, then save him. As many times as it takes.”

“*And you’ll help me do that, right?*” Scott asks, words easy and voice warm.

“Of course,” Isaac says.

A comfortable silence stretches between them, filling the air with the grainy sounds of rustling sheets and even breathing.

Scott is the one to break it, asking, “*So, do you believe in fate?*”

Isaac shrugs despite knowing Scott can’t see him. “I won’t rule out the possibility but...” Isaac thinks of Allison, thinks of how she took matters into her own hands and flipped the script. She changed fate. She changed *Isaac’s* fate. Isaac swallows thickly, “It’s hard to think that we were destined to experience such horrible things.”

“*But isn’t it worse if it was all just random?*” Scott asks. Isaac’s not sure if he’s countering Isaac’s opinion because he genuinely disagrees, or if he’s just curious. “*Isn’t it worse knowing that you could have prevented it, but you didn’t?*”

“Just because it’s not decided by fate doesn’t necessarily mean it doesn’t happen for a reason,” Isaac says. “Besides, there’s a line, I think. Like, there’s only so much we can do. We consistently do everything we can to change the outcome, but it doesn’t always matter.”

Scott goes quiet for a few seconds. Then, “*Allison told me she didn’t believe in fate once.*”

Isaac’s heart drops into his stomach. “Oh.”

“*When she broke up with me, I told her I knew we would end up together,*” Scott says. There’s emotion in his voice. “*And she said there’s no such thing as fate.*” Scott clears his throat. “*I guess she was right.*”

Isaac stays quiet for a moment, trying to string together the right words, trying to craft the perfect response. He’s running through sentences in his mind, assembling and disassembling them over and over, but none of them seem good enough.

Isaac must stay silent for too because Scott mumbles, “*Sorry, I–*”

“No,” Isaac says, soft but still cutting Scott off. “I was just... I was

trying to think of the right thing to say. I – I know you two weren't technically together anymore, but you still loved each other. You were still tied together, and you always will be."

There's a choked sound on the other line, like maybe Scott has started to cry, but he doesn't want Isaac to know. His voice is wet when he says, "*That was the perfect thing to say.*"

"Really?" Isaac asks, not meaning to sound so genuinely surprised. He's just so used to putting his foot in his mouth or speaking without substance. He's so used to accidental cruelty and empty words.

"*Yeah, I'm shocked too,*" Scott says, and Isaac can hear his teasing grin through the phone. Just like that, the mood starts to lift.

Isaac smiles, something small and secretive. "So, tell me about this grudge Stiles says you have against *Star Wars*."

It's mid morning when Isaac gets a text from Derek: **Meet me outside the loft.**

Isaac sends back a quick confirmation message, then pushes himself up off the couch and starts putting on his shoes. He's been almost ready to leave since Derek left to check on Brett at the animal clinic. As much as Isaac hoped Brett would be awake by now, he wasn't counting on it. Of course the pack wouldn't be so easy to find.

Once his shoes are tied, Isaac jogs down the stairs and out through the main doors of the building. There, Derek's car is parked and waiting for him. Isaac climbs inside, closing the door with a little too much force.

"So?" Isaac asks, buckling his seatbelt.

Derek doesn't drive off yet. Instead, he takes a moment to share the disappointing – but not unsurprising – news. "Brett's still out of it, so he can't tell us where the rest of the pack is."

"Okay. Then where do we start?" Isaac asks. They still need to try to find the pack. They have to try to warn them about the dead pool. It's the right thing to do.

"I know a little something about this pack," Derek says. "They have a kind of, uh, secret meeting place out in the woods. You'll have to

track them by scent.”

Derek doesn't mention the reason why *Isaac* has to be the one to track them. Instead, he tosses a piece of fabric at Isaac, who catches it much more easily than Derek and the flying shoe incident of 2012.

While Derek restarts the car and pulls out onto the road, Isaac unravels the material. It's Brett's lacrosse jersey, marked with *Talbot 28*. Isaac lifts the jersey to his nose, breathing past the surface level sweat and down to the harsh scent of pain and anxiety.

“The scent's strong,” Isaac says, lowering the fabric.

Derek keeps his eyes on the road, but says, “Good.”

The remainder of the drive to the preserve is passed in silence. It's not the most comfortable quiet they've ever shared, but that's more Isaac's fault than Derek's. Isaac can't stop thinking about Derek's powers, Kate, everything. Isaac wants to talk, but he doesn't know how to have a conversation without bringing it all up to the surface, and it's really not the appropriate moment for that discussion.

So, Isaac stew in silence and tries not to fidget.

Eventually, they arrive at Beacon Hills Preserve. Derek takes the car as deep into the woods as he can, then he shifts the gear stick into park and shuts off the engine. Derek turns to Isaac, meeting him with a pointed raise of his brows.

Isaac gets the memo, bringing the jersey up to his nose for one final sniff. He closes his eyes and pulls the scent into his lungs. He inhales as much of the fabric as he can, memorizing each layer and undertone.

Isaac doesn't open his eyes until the scent is secure in his memory. Then, he sets the jersey aside, looking to Derek and giving him a nod. Derek returns it, and they both exit the car.

They step out into the preserve, ready to begin their search.

However, they only make it a few feet before the scent reaches Isaac. He goes still. It's not Brett, but it's familiar nonetheless.

Derek, noticing Isaac's pause, comes to a stop of his own. He looks over his shoulder, asking, “What is it?”

“You really don’t smell that?” Isaac counters, eyes squinting.

Derek shakes his head in a small, barely there movement.

Isaac puts Derek out of his confusion, and says, “It’s gunpowder.”

Derek’s eyes start to roam, exploring every direction of their surroundings. When they fall to the forest floor, he spots it. Isaac watches as Derek kneels down, picking up a small brass object, almost entirely camouflaged among the leaves.

“If Brett’s pack is out here... I don’t think they’re meeting,” Derek says, holding up what he found. It’s a bullet casing. “They’re hiding.”

—

The pair have been searching in stifled silence for almost an hour when Isaac finally cracks. He can’t stand feeling awkward around Derek. So, he blurts the first question that comes to mind, “What does the quote mean?”

Three things cannot long be hidden: the sun, the moon, the truth.

Brett whispered it last night. It was the clue they used to discover that he’s a part of Satomi’s pack, meaning it’s important. But, no one ever explained its actual significance.

Derek keeps walking, keeps covering more ground, but he does respond. “It’s a mantra,” he says. “Satomi is a bitten werewolf. Learning control wasn’t easy for her, but the mantra helps.”

“Like ‘alpha, beta, omega?’” Isaac asks. He remembers the triskele painted on the lid of Derek’s supply trunk, he remembers the triskele jar used to trap the nogitsune, he remembers the triskele tattooed between Derek’s shoulder blades.

Isaac remembers the triskele talisman. He remembers Young Derek and his inability to control the shift.

Derek doesn’t answer the question directly. Instead, he says, “I had to use the mantra a lot after Paige.”

Isaac has never heard that name out of Derek’s mouth before. He tries not to fumble the moment, tries to keep his feet from tripping and his mouth from falling open. Still, Isaac can’t find the words to say. He goes completely mute, mind empty of all potential replies.

Derek doesn't seem to mind. He just says, "I think she was my first anchor."

"Before anger?" Isaac asks. It's not a very good question, the answer is obvious.

Or, so Isaac thought.

"Before you," Derek clarifies. He's stopped walking now, but he's still staring ahead, not looking at Isaac.

Isaac says, "You're my anchor too."

Derek's head swivels to Isaac in a fast, jerking movement. He's surprised, though Isaac doesn't really understand why. He thought he had been pretty obvious about it.

And yet, the corner of Derek's mouth is tilting up in a tiny, sideways smile. It's there for a second, then it falls away.

Derek turns again, eyes cast out over the preserve, "Kate happened right after Paige died."

Derek talks about Kate as often as he talks about Paige. Meaning: never. Sure, her name has come up a handful of times in the past few weeks, but he never mentions their past together. Never.

Isaac is so caught off guard by the sudden show of vulnerability that he has no idea what he's supposed to do or say. All he comes up with is, "Oh."

It doesn't seem to matter because, surprisingly, Derek keeps talking.

"I was such a mess after Paige that I..." Derek exhales. "It was so easy for her to trick me into trusting her because I *wanted* it to be real. I wanted *her* to be real." Derek continues avoiding Isaac's gaze, next words coming quieter, "And then, almost my entire family died because of her. Because of me."

"It's not your fault, Derek," Isaac says because he *has* to. Isaac needs Derek to know that he doesn't believe, even for a second, that Derek was the one to blame. Derek was sixteen when the Hale fire was lit. He was a child who, in the midst of a traumatic loss, trusted the wrong person.

That doesn't make it his fault. It makes him a victim. (Isaac doesn't

say this, knows it's the worst thing he could possibly say to Derek.)

Derek just shrugs. "It doesn't really matter whose fault it was though, does it? They're dead, and I'm left standing here."

If there's anything Isaac can understand, it's this. It's being the last one standing from a family torn apart and killed. It's being the one to walk away, the one left behind.

It's survivor's guilt.

"You deserve to be standing here," Isaac says sincerely.

"Do I?" Derek asks, finally moving to lock eyes with Isaac. "After everything I've done?"

"Yes," Isaac says, simple as anything. Because, in Isaac's mind, it really is that simple. "It doesn't matter what you've done. *Nobody* deserves to die. *Everyone* deserves another chance."

Derek's eyebrows furrow. "That sounds like something Scott would say."

"And isn't he usually right?" Isaac asks, lip sliding into a nearly smug smile. Then, before Derek can argue, "Come on, we need to keep looking."

—

Isaac and Derek come up empty handed. They comb through miles of brown leaves and barren trees, but find absolutely nothing. There's no trace of Brett's scent, just damp dirt and wild animals.

The sun sets, casting darkness over the preserve and making their already slim odds of finding the pack even slimmer. And so, they return to Derek's car to regroup and assess the situation.

Once inside, Isaac asks, "Are you sure this is where the pack would go to hide?"

He's not questioning Derek's intel, but he's also not questioning his own ability to track a scent. He had a good lock on Brett. If the pack was out here, Isaac should have been able to find them. (So, maybe he is questioning Derek's intel. But only a little.)

"If they don't want to be found, then we aren't going to find them," Derek says. Isaac's expression twists into confusion, waiting for Derek

to elaborate. He does, “Some werewolves have... an ability. A kind of mastery over their bodies where they can actually inhibit their scent.”

“They can hide from other werewolves?” Isaac asks, exasperated. It would explain why they didn’t know about Brett or Demarco or half of the other names on the dead pool, but that doesn’t make it any less annoying. Just another fact about werewolves that Isaac knows *nothing* about.

“From anyone that’s trying to find them,” Derek adds.

“Well, that’s certainly convenient,” Isaac scoffs.

Then, the car goes stagnant. The conversation comes to a standstill, and so do Isaac and Derek. Neither of them say anything more, but neither of them move either. They aren’t ready to let this go. They aren’t ready to give up on the pack.

Isaac starts to think that, maybe, they’ve been coming at this all wrong. They’ve been operating under the perspective of two werewolves looking for another pack. Isaac’s been following Derek’s lead, following his instincts to rely on his werewolf abilities above all else. But, maybe, that isn’t the best approach.

Maybe they have to come at this from a human perspective.

“Maybe we need to try something different,” Isaac says, drawing Derek’s attention. He continues, “Maybe we need to think like Stiles.”

“Like an... over caffeinated insomniac?” Derek questions, eyebrows betraying his disdain for the idea.

“Like a *human*,” Isaac corrects. The initial reference to Derek’s draining powers is pointed and sharp, but Isaac takes mercy and keeps going, “Like a detective. If they’re really Buddhists, then maybe, instead of asking where *werewolves* hide, we should be asking—”

“Where would Buddhists hide,” Derek interrupts, finishing Isaac’s sentence as he catches on. Derek goes quiet, expression shifting like he’s on the brink of realization. He turns his head, eyes falling onto the dashboard. The epiphany hits. “When Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree, he looked to the east for enlightenment.”

“Okay, so what’s the most eastern spot in Beacon Hills?” Isaac asks. It’s something he should probably know considering he’s lived his whole life in this town, but who really pays attention to cardinal

directions?

Derek, apparently, because he says, "Lookout Point."

Derek and Isaac share a look, communicating with only their eyes. And then, they take off into the preserve. Once more, the two exit the car, dropping down onto the leaf strewn path. But, this time, they have direction.

If Isaac had any lingering doubts about the truth of Derek losing his powers, they're put to rest in that moment. Isaac doesn't hold back, just sprints in the direction of the rising moon, moving as quickly as possible. Even for a werewolf, Isaac is fast, but Derek has always been able to keep up with him. Derek has always been able to match him in speed, or, at least, trail only a few feet behind.

Tonight, that's not the case. Isaac comes to a skidding stop at the edge of the preserve, peering out at the lights of Beacon Hills. He expects Derek to be right on his tail, but, when he turns, Derek isn't even in his line of sight.

Without powers, Derek is still physically fit and perfectly capable, so it's not as if he's miles away. It's only a few seconds later that Derek crests a hill, entering Isaac's view. But, still, it's a stark contrast from Derek's usual speed.

Isaac waits for Derek, all the while taking in his surroundings. From where he's standing, Isaac doesn't have visual of the pack, but he does catch a scent. It's dark and wet and thick. It clogs Isaac's senses, slowly turning stronger and more bitter. It coats Isaac's throat with every inhale.

Eventually, Derek comes up next to Isaac, who, on reflex, reaches out to grab his wrist. Derek looks up at Isaac, question in his eyes. Isaac breathes in the scent again, nose crinkling, then, genuinely, "Can you smell it?"

"No," Derek says, almost somber.

Isaac lets go of Derek's wrist. Face still scrunched up, Isaac follows the scent with his eyes, and says, "I think it's wolfsbane."

Derek takes a step towards the source, holding a hand out in front of Isaac. "Wait for me."

Isaac huffs an incredulous almost laugh, but it's completely humorless.

“Are you joking? Absolutely not,” Isaac says. “We go together.”

Derek pauses. His mouth twists from side to side, like he’s thinking it over. Then, eyes narrowed in disapproval, he lands on a put upon, “Fine.”

Derek clearly doesn’t like the idea, but neither does Isaac. If he had his way, the nearly defenseless Derek would be the one hanging back, but that’s not going to happen. Neither of them are going to get their way. So, they compromise.

Together, Isaac and Derek approach the scent with an abundance of caution. With each step forward, the scent grows more pungent, starting to make Isaac’s eyes water. The smell is suffocating. Isaac can’t believe Derek doesn’t pick up on it. The fact is scary and unsettling, but it’s nothing compared to what they’re about to find.

Isaac and Derek walk through a group of trees, breaching the epicenter of the scent. That’s when the bodies come into view.

There’s at least a dozen of them, all splayed out haphazardly across the forest floor and the large rocks. They all share the same markings: eyes peeled open wide, veins in the face gone deep purple, and black blood dried around their mouths.

Isaac should have been expecting it, should have anticipated that they would be too late, but the possibility never even crossed his mind. He was blindsided by an optimism so unlike himself. And, now, his stomach is churning and his mouth has gone dry.

Isaac can’t bear to look at them anymore. It feels wrong. It feels disrespectful. It feels like a violation. So, Isaac switches his focus over to Derek.

There are tears in his eyes.

Isaac lips part and his next breath comes a little sharper in surprise. Derek is staring at the bodies, eyes wet with unshed emotion. It’s such a selfless thing, this feeling Derek is experiencing. It’s not brought on by personal connection or direct impact. It’s just pure, unadulterated sympathy.

“Derek?” Isaac speaks, quiet and light.

Derek blinks rapidly, but doesn’t turn his head. He whispers, “They were poisoned.”

Isaac nods, but doesn't say anything. As far as he knows, these are total strangers to Derek. And yet, there's grief in his chemosignals. Isaac could theorize where the feeling comes from – the fact that Derek's family were supposed to be protectors of Beacon Hills or the reminder of the Hale fire and an entire pack decimated – but he doesn't. It's not important. It's just empathy. It's just grief for the loss of other werewolves. The loss of other *human* beings.

So, Isaac doesn't say anything. He's not unaffected by the massacre. He's experiencing it too. The heavy, straining feel of facing more death, more destruction. Isaac grieves.

He stands at Derek's side, and, together, they let the heartache run its course. They breathe in tandem with each other, filling their lungs and taking each breath in honor of another casualty. Even through the smell of poison, Isaac continues to breathe in deep. He pays homage to the dead, committing to memory the feeling of life. He reminds himself what it is to be alive.

Isaac and Derek's hearts are the next to fall in sync. They beat a steady rhythm, dedicating each pump of blood to another victim.

Isaac's eyes are halfway closed, taking it all in when he hears it. A third heartbeat.

Suddenly, Isaac's heart untethers from Derek's, picking up speed in his chest. His eyes fly open, and, desperate, he says, "There's a heartbeat. Someone's alive."

Just then, there's a shuddering breath. It's faint, but unmistakable. Isaac and Derek let the sound guide them past the concentrated mass of bodies and through another dip in the preserve. They round a pair of trees, and, there, they find a trembling hand, feebly raised and covered in blood.

The victim isn't a stranger. It's Braeden.

Derek runs right to her, dropping to his knees at her side. Isaac stops a good two feet away, stunned to the point of inaction. Braeden's middle is gushing blood, smeared across her hands and down her arms. Her heartbeat is weak and her breathing is shaky.

Derek whispers nonsense reassurances as he slips his arms under Braeden's knees and shoulders, slowly lifting her from the ground. Isaac moves to steady them, helping Derek stand up fully and support Braeden's weight in a way that doesn't risk dropping her.

Derek and Isaac share in a brief moment of frenzied panic. Even in knowing her for such a short amount of time – or, in Isaac’s case, barely knowing her at all – Braeden has come to mean something to both of them. Their connections to Braeden are entirely different, not at all comparable, but, still, they’re connected nonetheless. Despite the differing nature of their relationships, Braeden is important to both of them, and neither one wants to see her die.

Then, the stifling tension is broken by a loud, thundering howl. It echoes through the preserve, bouncing from tree to tree and sending birds scattering its wake. Isaac doesn’t know how, but he recognizes the sound.

“*Liam*,” Isaac breathes, not loud enough to even be counted as a whisper. And, again, with greater volume, “*Liam... That was Liam. And I’m pretty sure he’s in trouble.*”

Derek doesn’t give much of a reaction. He’s standing there with Braeden cradled in his arms, getting her blood all over himself, and Isaac knows that’s where his focus lies. It’s where his focus should lie. If they’re going to save her, he *has* to get a move on.

But, Isaac can’t leave the preserve. Not yet. Not when he knows that Liam is nearby and in need of help. Isaac told Scott he would help him save Liam’s life as many times as it took. Isaac all but promised it, and he can’t go back on his word. Not when Scott would never do that to him.

Isaac has to go after Liam.

And so, Isaac says, “You *need* to take Braeden to the hospital, but I *can’t* come with you.”

Derek looks between Isaac and Braeden’s weakening body. Derek doesn’t want to split up, and neither does Isaac, but they have to. Derek has to save Braeden, and Isaac has to save Liam.

“Derek, go,” Isaac says with a firm, but gentle voice. “Save her.”

Derek readjusts his hold on Braeden, and says, just like before, “Fine.”

And then, they part ways. Isaac runs deeper into the preserve, following the trail of Liam’s howl. Leaves and twigs kick up at Isaac’s feet, but he pays them no mind, he just keeps moving. He slips between clusters of trees, skirting around low hanging branches and jumping over a single boulder.

Isaac runs as fast as his legs will carry him, determined to get to Liam before it's too late. They might not have been able to save Satomi's pack, but Isaac will be damned if he lets Liam suffer the same fate.

This isn't a stranger. This is Liam. Isaac may not know him well, but he's Scott's beta. He's pack, and Isaac promised to keep him alive. So, that's what he's going to do.

With matchless motivation, Isaac taps into every reserve he has, pushing himself even faster. The wind moves past him so quickly and his feet slam into the ground with such force that his movements are painful, but, still, Isaac doesn't stop. He doesn't let up.

Isaac just keeps going. Even as he spots the well and Scott's hunched form, Isaac barely slows. He runs right up to Scott, coming to a harsh and sudden stop beside him. Isaac doesn't give himself a chance to breathe, continuing to move on autopilot. He doesn't think about it, just reaches down into the well and grasps Liam's other arm, the one not already secure in Scott's grip.

Through their combined strength, Isaac and Scott pull Liam up. He works with them, using his lower body to help get his legs up and over the lip of the well. Then, with his feet on solid ground, Liam stumbles, sitting against the ledge.

Isaac lets go of Liam's arm, but Scott doesn't. Isaac takes a small step backwards, watching as Scott and Liam share in a moment of fierce, weighted eye contact. Liam is breathing heavily, skin wet along with his eyes, and Scott is holding him in a protective, unwavering grip.

"You're okay, Liam," Scott says. The reassurance is as much for Liam as it is for himself. Then, Scott tugs Liam into a tight hug. He wraps his arms around Liam, enveloping him in his warmth and practically cradling him to his chest. Liam clutches back just as desperately, seeking comfort from Scott. Voice full of relief, Scott repeats, "You're okay."

Isaac kind of wants to flee. He helped save Liam, and, now, his job is done. Isaac isn't needed for this part. In fact, he feels severely out of place, like this is a very private moment Isaac is infringing on. He feels like an intruder.

Isaac takes another step away, but it's a mistake. The movement catches Scott's awareness. He breaks the embrace. Scott doesn't let go completely, maintaining his the physical contact with Liam but switching his attention over to Isaac.

“Where the hell did you come from?” Scott asks. His volume is raised only slightly, but, compared to the quiet whispers of before, it feels like a shout.

Isaac forces himself to close the gap between himself and the well, taking up his place at Scott’s side once more. Isaac aids Scott in bringing Liam to his feet as he says, “Derek and I had just found Satomi’s pack when we heard Liam howl.”

“You found them?” Scott asks, something like hope in his words.

Isaac hates that he has to be one to dash his positivity. But, he also doesn’t care much for tact considering the rush they seem to be in. So, he just says, “Yeah, but they’re all dead.”

Scott gapes, going completely still and utterly speechless. His grip on Liam slackens just so, and, it would be fine, if not for the way Liam is starting to lose consciousness. Isaac holds on a little tighter as Liam sways on his feet, eyes fluttering as he slips out of wake.

Isaac pushes Scott past the shock, “We can deal with it later, but, right now, we have to focus on Liam. We have to save him, remember? So, what’s wrong with him?”

“He was taken by Garrett and poisoned with yellow wolfsbane,” Scott says, coming back into action. “We have to get him Deaton.”

“Okay, let’s go,” Isaac says easily.

Scott nods, and they do just that.

At first, the pair supports Liam’s weight between them, but it proves tricky to navigate the rough terrain of the preserve. So, after a few minutes of struggling, they stop only long enough for Scott to lift Liam into his arms, not dissimilar to the way Derek was carrying Braeden.

From there, things move much faster. They make steady headway, breaking through sections of trees and finding the main path. The trip passes in a blur of rushing silence. The quiet isn’t a conscious decision and it’s not a source of discomfort or awkwardness. They just simply do not have the space to worry about anything other than getting Liam to safety.

And, eventually, they do. They make it out to the main entrance of the preserve, just by the green sign. Unexpectedly for Isaac, they find Mr. Argent waiting for them with a car at the ready. Isaac hasn’t actually

seen Argent since his return from France, but there's no time for a reunion. Not until they've at least made it out onto the road.

With some careful maneuvering, they hoist Liam into the backseat of the car. Isaac joins him there while Scott takes up the passenger seat and Argent mans the wheel.

The car ride begins in quietude. Hopelessly, Isaac tries to ignore the surfacing memory from the start of junior year. The night they rescued Boyd from the alpha pack. Isaac's fairly certain he'll never be able to ride in a car with Argent again without thinking about that night, but, this time in particular, the resemblance is uncanny. Isaac is in the backseat with an unconscious and newly rescued werewolf, Scott is in the passenger seat looking like he'd rather be anywhere else, and Argent is driving them away from the scene of it all.

And, honestly, the biggest difference isn't Scott's new alpha status or the hole in Isaac's heart that seems to grow larger in Argent's presence. No, the biggest difference is the beard Argent grew during his time in France.

Surprisingly, it's Argent who speaks first. "I thought we were only picking up one stray."

It's an attempt to lighten the mood and, while the joke does fall a little flat, the effort is appreciated. It's enough to jar Isaac out of the daze he was beginning to fall into.

"Hey, Mr. Argent. Good to see you again," Isaac says. Then, as for the explanation to his presence, he repeats almost verbatim what he told Scott, "Derek and I were out in the woods looking for Satomi's pack when we heard Liam howl."

"Where's Derek now?" Argent asks.

Isaac remembers red blood and Braeden's shaking hand. He swallows.

"Uh. All the members of Satomi's pack that we found were poisoned and killed, but I guess Braeden was looking for them too and got caught in the crossfire," Isaac says. He's not doing a very good job at explaining, but he continues anyway, "She was shot and badly injured. Derek is taking her to the hospital."

Then, the car falls back into silence, leaving Isaac to ponder Braeden's fate and what will come of the bodies left in the woods.

It's a bleak car ride, but, eventually, they make it to the animal clinic. There, they rush Liam into the back room and onto the metal table. The solution is the same procedure from the night before, though it's made much easier by Liam's unconscious state. Deaton drags the scalpel down the length of Liam's chest, expelling golden smoke. Liam twitches and breathes a little more rapidly as the poison is released, but his eyes stay closed.

They watch as the wound drawn in Liam's chest knits back together in a matter of seconds.

Scott uses the sleeve of his hoodie to mop up the sweat along Liam's brow, and, maybe it's the contact or maybe it's just coincidence, but Liam's breathing starts to level out again. His heart rate slows and his minute movements fade into stillness.

Then, Scott looks up at Isaac. "Were *all* the members of Satomi's pack really dead?"

"All the ones we found were," Isaac says. It comes out like an apology.

Scott lowers his gaze, eyes fixating on a random point in the room. His eyebrows fall and his jawline seems to sharpen. At first, Isaac thinks it's a sign of his hope dipping. But then, Scott speaks, and Isaac realizes it's an expression of determination.

"I don't want to keep watching people die," Scott says. He's quiet, but his conviction speaks volumes.

"I'm not sure you have much choice about that," Argent says, voice rumbling low in his chest.

Isaac disagrees. Isaac thinks if Scott put his mind to it, he could do just about anything.

"Maybe I do," Scott says, nodding in quick little movements. He lifts his eyes, letting them briefly meet with Argent, then Isaac, then Deaton.

"That's a lot of burden to carry, Scott," Deaton says as their eyes connect.

"I don't care," Scott shakes his head, not willing to be deterred. "No one else dies," he says. "Everyone on that list, everyone on that *dead pool*. It doesn't matter if – if they're wendigos, or werewolves, or whatever... I'm gonna save everyone."

Maybe Deaton is right, maybe it is a heavy burden to carry, but Scott won't be doing it all on his own. Scott *never* fights alone. And, if Isaac has any say in the matter, he *never* will.

Chapter End Notes

Shout out to my best friend for coming up with the “over caffeinated insomniac” replacement line. We do not support casual ableism in this household.

Weaponized

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 4 episode 7

Word count: 9,704

Chapter Notes

I know in the canon episode they're taking the PSAT, but they're in the second semester of their junior year, so that makes absolutely no sense and I changed it to the SAT instead. You're welcome.

It's strange being alone in the loft. Isaac has spent *some* time here by himself, but that was when the sun was high in the sky and the loft was full of light. Now, the moon has risen and night has fallen.

It's strange being here in the dark, unable to hear the steady beat of Derek's heart or the rippling of his breath.

Isaac is getting ready for bed when his phone rings, making him jolt in his unease. He expects it to be Scott – though he is a little surprised by the call considering they were together at the animal clinic less than an hour ago – but it isn't. When Isaac flips his phone, the screen reads: **Derek.**

Isaac answers with, "Hello?"

"Hey, Isaac. Did you find Liam?" Derek asks.

"Yeah, yeah, we did, but how's Braeden?" Isaac asks, quickly moving the conversation along. Liam is fine, so Isaac sees no point in dragging out the explanation. Not when it's Braeden's status that looms in uncertainty.

"She's stable," Derek says, *"but I think I'm going to stay here with her tonight. Just in case."*

"Oh? Just in case?" Isaac questions, voice teasing and full of implications.

Derek, for his part, purposely ignores Isaac. Instead, he asks, *"Are you going to be okay at the loft by yourself?"*

"I'm seventeen, I can handle spending a night alone," Isaac says. (At least, he thinks he can.)

"If you say so," Derek counters. "But I was referring more to the professional assassins that know you're worth eleven million dollars."

"Yes, Derek, thank you for the reminder," Isaac says sarcastically. He really doesn't need help remembering the constant threat to his life. Then, he sighs, and, more seriously, says, "It's still only one night. I can take care of myself."

"Can you?" Derek argues, but there's humor in his voice. It's that familiar sort of making fun that Isaac loves so much.

"Okay, fine. I can take care of myself just as well as you can take care of yourself," Isaac admits.

"Yeah, that doesn't give me a lot of confidence," Derek says. The statement is completely sincere, but it makes Isaac laugh nonetheless. Once again, Derek ignores him in favor of saying, "I probably won't see you beforehand, so good luck on the SAT tomorrow."

Isaac shouldn't be surprised by how well Derek knows his schedule, but he is, just a little. Isaac smiles, and says, "Thank you."

"Try and get at least a few hours of sleep, okay? I'll see you tomorrow," Derek says.

Isaac answers back, "See you tomorrow."

—

Isaac doesn't try to sleep.

At first, Isaac hadn't been too worried about Derek's dwindling powers. It seemed like a change they could adapt to, something they could learn to navigate. But then, Isaac had been forced to make the tough decision to abandon Derek in the woods in order to save Liam.

Now, Isaac is feeling more and more concerned. With the dead pool hanging overhead, they're all vulnerable, but Derek even more so than most. Isaac can't stand idly by knowing Derek is at risk. Derek is frustratingly unfazed, like he's resigned to what's happening, but Isaac isn't. He doesn't want to watch anyone else die, especially not Derek.

Isaac has to at least *try* to help.

So, instead of climbing into bed, Isaac approaches the bookshelf in his room. Derek never did get around to moving the books, but Isaac doesn't mind it now (though, honestly, he didn't really mind before either). Isaac runs his fingers over the leather spines. He doesn't know exactly what he's looking for, but he has shelves full of more information about the supernatural than he's ever been exposed to before.

Ever since stepping into this world, Isaac has grown accustomed to feeling like he's stumbling around in the dark. He's grown used to feeling like the last to know, or feeling like he had to beg just for knowledge that would keep him alive.

Maybe it's time for Isaac to do something to change that.

Since Derek isn't around, Scott comes to pick Isaac up and drive them both to school for the SAT. It feels reminiscent of old times, back when Isaac used to live with the McCalls. It's only been a few weeks since then, but it's already starting to feel distant and cherished. Regardless, a smile spreads across Isaac's face at the memories.

Isaac steps out of the building to find Scott standing beside his motorcycle. Isaac proceeds towards him, and, as he does, Scott asks, "Have you heard anything about Braeden?"

"Derek said she was stable last night, but I haven't heard from him since," Isaac says with a small shrug.

"Well, it's a good thing you found her when you did," Scott says.

Isaac nods. Then, "Did Lydia and Stiles have any luck with the dead pool yesterday?"

"Yeah, they cracked the last third. Liam and Malia are both on it," Scott says. He's avoiding Isaac's eyes, but Isaac doesn't take it personally. Scott was nervous enough before Liam was even officially on the list. Isaac can only imagine how he's feeling now.

Eventually, Scott looks up again, and adds, "Malia's on it as Hale."

"Oh, shit," Isaac breathes. "You're gonna have to tell her, aren't you?"

"Probably," Scott says. Then, quite abruptly, he pulls his helmet back on and brings the conversation to a sudden halt. Isaac brushes it off,

chalking the abnormal behavior up to pre-test anxiety and, with practiced ease, joins Scott on the motorcycle.

Once Isaac and Scott arrive at the school, they join the other pack members in the line of waiting students. Isaac leans back against the wall of lockers, ignoring the way the metal of a combination lock is digging into his back. He's running on three hours of sleep and some of Derek's coffee – Isaac usually doesn't drink it, hates the strong scent and lingering taste, but he needed the caffeine today. He doesn't want to have to take the SAT more than once, so he has to make this count.

Kira, who's standing across from Isaac, looks up and down the hallway, scanning the line of test takers. She asks, "Where's Lydia?"

"She took it her freshman year," Stiles says without hesitation.

Stiles and Lydia weren't even friends in freshman year, how does he know that?

Malia turns on Stiles, leveling him with an angry look and, "Does that mean I could have taken it some other time?"

"Malia," Scott interjects, trying to be reassuring, "you studied harder for this than anyone."

Malia is restless and grumpy in her anxiety, arguing back, "Doesn't mean I'm gonna do good."

"Well," Stiles corrects. He really should think before he speaks.

Malia looks at him again, drawing the word out, "Well... what?"

"It's 'do well,' not 'good,'" Stiles says quietly, like he's starting to realize his mistake, but it's too late to backpedal.

"Oh god!" Malia exclaims, arms flailing in frustration. She nearly slaps Isaac in the face, but he steps to the side just in time, moving a little closer to Scott.

"Okay," Stiles mouths, eyes bugging out as he looks for someone to rescue him from the mess he's made.

Scott steps in. "You're doing this," he says, speaking with conviction. "Because while we're trying not to die, we still need to live."

Malia tips her head back against the locker, rolling her eyes as she sees her fate beginning to seal.

Despite her obvious disdain, Scott continues, "If I survive high school, I'd like to go to college. A *good* college."

Isaac hasn't thought much about life after high school. Honestly, he never thought he would make it that far. His demise has always felt like an inevitability – a matter of when, not if. And, even as his circumstances have drastically changed in the past year, his odds of survival haven't gotten much better.

Though, maybe, just maybe, he should allow himself to think about a future outside of life or death. Maybe he should allow himself some hope.

"It's only three hours," Kira says, aiming for encouragement. "We can survive three hours."

Stiles goes slack-jawed, face contorting in exasperation, like he can't believe Kira just said that. Even Scott's expression seems to drop into something more rigid. It's not frustration, but he's definitely seeing the irony in Kira's statement. Three hours is a long time for something to go wrong. They aren't guaranteed the next ten minutes without catastrophe, let alone the next one hundred eighty.

After that, the group falls into silence. The hallway is rich with anxiety and stress, the scent of it toying with Isaac's senses. He scrunches up his nose, but it gives no relief. The sensation lingers, like a sneeze that will never come. Isaac reaches up to rub the bottom of his nose with the back of his hand, alleviating the feeling with a little more effectiveness.

Scott meets Isaac's eye, giving a small, amused smile. "Chemosignals?"

"Yeah," Isaac nods, dropping his hand and thumping his head against the lockers. "I really wish I could turn it off sometimes, like I really don't need to breathe in the anxiety of fifty different students."

Scott, wanting to offer a solution, says, "Well, maybe that's a skill you can learn."

Isaac smiles. He can't fight it. Isaac is only mindlessly complaining, and, still, Scott is trying to help him. It's kind. And so, Isaac reiterates, "Maybe."

Eventually, the pack makes it to the front of the line, entering into the classroom. Ms. Martin and an unfamiliar official test proctor are waiting for them inside, ready to get them set up for the exam.

Scott goes first, then Isaac after that. Isaac presses his thumb into the black stamp pad, transferring the ink onto his scantron in a perfectly unique print. Next, Isaac grabs a pair of pencils and accepts the proffered test booklet from the proctor. Lastly, he makes sure his phone is switched off, then hands it over to Ms. Martin.

Isaac follows Scott down an aisle of desks, taking up the seat behind him. The rest of their group filters in one by one, Kira and Malia sitting on either side of Scott while Stiles sits next to Isaac and behind Malia.

Isaac watches Stiles settle in beside him. He has one pencil behind his ear and another already in his mouth. He flips open the cover of the booklet just as the proctor announces, "Please do not open the test booklet until you are instructed to do so."

Stiles looks up at Isaac, shooting him a wide-eyed and ridiculous expression. Isaac stifles his laughter behind closed lips, choosing only to roll his eyes at Stiles' shenanigans and, instead, focus on the proctor.

"This test is two hours and ten minutes," he says. "There will be two twenty-five minute critical reading sections, two twenty-five minute math sections, and an essay portion that will last thirty minutes." Then, the proctor speaks directly to Ms. Martin, saying, "There's supposed to be two teachers monitoring the exam."

Ms. Martin sucks a breath in through her teeth, and says, "I know. It's Coach. He's not exactly... punctual. Um. Let me just try him again."

Ms. Martin flashes a brightly fake smile, grabbing her phone off the desk and taking it with her into the hallway.

While they wait for her return, the anxiety in the room begins to thicken. Isaac is pretty sure at least half the chemosignals are coming from Stiles. Before, out in the hallway, he acted almost indifferent towards the test. Now, though, his leg is jumping and the pencil in his hand is rapidly tapping against his desk with no real rhythm. Now, his nervousness is palpable.

The fidgeting is definitely a little annoying, but Isaac keeps his complaints to himself. Stiles doesn't deserve Isaac's criticism. In fact, it

would likely only make his anxiety worse. So, Isaac just tries to mind his own business, tuning out the incessant tapping and the sporadic movements.

A handful of minutes later, Ms. Martin reenters the room. She's still alone. She shoots for nonchalance, gesturing with her phone and saying, "I can't find him, but Mr. Yukimura is upstairs grading papers. Do you want me to try him?"

"We have to start," the official proctor says. "We can ask for his help during the first break."

Ms. Martin nods. There's a brief moment where the air around them seems to stir, dread and uncertainty swirling at their feet and picking up speed. But then, the proctor puts it to rest. He starts the timer on his watch, and declares, "You may now open your test booklets... and begin."

Once the words are spoken, the students launch into action and the room fills with the sound of rustling papers and the scratching of pencils.

As the test progresses, Isaac finds that, because he has felt so numb to his future for so long, he definitely didn't study enough. He's having a hard time, but he's not the only one. Malia is handling the pressure way worse than Isaac. Every time Isaac looks up to check the clock, he sees Malia, almost directly in his line of sight, with frantic energy all around her.

And then, a student faints. She slips right out of her chair, crumpling to the ground with a thump that brings all eyes to her in a synchronized turn of heads.

"Sydney!" Ms. Martin exclaims. She rushes down the aisle towards the girl, crouching down at her side.

Sydney doesn't stay out for long. She's already beginning to stir, coming back to consciousness and fumbling to get off the floor. Ms. Martin helps steady her, bringing Sydney to her feet and asking, "Are you all right?"

The girl is breathing heavily, appearing a little pale and a lot embarrassed. Awkwardly, she says, "I'm okay. I just got kind of dizzy."

Isaac watches the exchange, noting the exact moment when Ms.

Martin's mood shifts.

She holds Sydney's arm, gently turning it in her grip. Then, the change happens. Ms. Martin turns severe in her concern, "Sydney. How long have you had this?"

Isaac can't really see what's happening. Ms. Martin has her back to Isaac, blocking herself and Sydney almost entirely from his view. He only catches a few glimpses of her worried expression, missing out on any sight of Sydney's arm.

Sydney exhales a breath, revealing her surprise. "I don't know."

Still standing behind the desk, the proctor calls, "Ms. Martin, do I need to stop the test?"

"Uh. No... Um. It's – It's fine," Ms. Martin stutters, heart rate betraying her lie. Whatever is going on, Ms. Martin is uneasy about it. She might even be scared.

Ms. Martin helps Sydney back into her seat. The rest of the students are still eyeing her with curiosity, but Isaac is watching Ms. Martin. She seems to know something, like she has some suspicion, some idea of what's about to unfold. Isaac knows better than to disregard the intuition of a banshee's mother.

So, he watches as she walks slow but sure to the front of the classroom. Her hands are twisting together in a nervous way, mouth parting long before she speaks. Then, with thinly veiled concern, she says, "Everybody stay in your seats. I'll, um, I'll be back in a minute."

Ms. Martin picks up her phone again, lowering her voice to the proctor to say, "Nobody leaves the room."

The tension already blanketing the room becomes even heavier. Isaac can feel it in the back of his throat with every breath. Something is happening here, and they all know it.

As they wait for it to come to a head, Isaac spares a brief glance towards Sydney, and, finally, he gets a look at her arm. On the underside of her left wrist is a purpley-red pattern, forming a shape not unlike that of a bolt of lightning. It looks painful and raw, but it also looks like a human affliction.

Still, the strain in the classroom's atmosphere doesn't dissipate. It continues to rub along Isaac's skin in a scratchy, uncomfortable way. He clenches and unclenches his fists, trying to return his attention

back to his test, but it's no use. He can't concentrate, and neither can anyone else. That's why, when they hear Ms. Martin frantically shouting, "Get back! No! Do not come in here! Get back outside!" almost every student pours out into the hallway near-immediately.

They watch as Ms. Martin hastily closes and locks the exterior school doors. She turns around, finding a sea of students waiting and watching her. Then, with more confidence than she should be warranted after such an outburst and in a move not dissimilar to the attitude of her daughter, she says, "Back to your seats. Now."

Isaac, Scott, and Stiles are the last to leave the hall. They linger for a moment longer, sharing eye contact and recognizing the disaster headed their way.

When the three don't immediately disperse, she says even more sternly, "Please."

There's another split second of hesitation, then they comply, returning to the classroom with the rest of the students.

Inside, Isaac and Scott pause just beyond the shut door, not yet finding their seats. They listen closely as Ms. Martin's voice easily carries into the classroom with werewolf hearing as its guide.

"I need the number for the CDC," she says. "Yes, the Center for Disease Control."

—

They don't have to wait long for the CDC to arrive. Donned in bright yellow hazmat suits and carrying supply cases, they begin securing the school, enacting an extensive quarantine. Privacy sheets are plastered over the windows, oxygen tanks are carted in, and clear plastic hubs are set up and decked out with hospital beds and IV machines.

All at once, their boring SAT day becomes one of chaos. Isaac's not surprised.

The actual test has been postponed, but, still, none of the students are allowed to leave. So, while Scott goes in search of more information, the rest of the pack sits together, theorizing about the mayhem.

"Bet they're thinking smallpox," Stiles says quietly.

"Not likely," the test proctor mutters. The words draw their attention,

but the proctor keeps his own eyes fixated on a spot on the desk as he says, “Smallpox was eradicated worldwide in 1979.” Isaac squints, glancing between Stiles and the proctor. When he speaks again, he lifts his gaze, “We’ve only managed to completely eradicate two viruses in history. The other was rinderpest... It killed cows.”

“So, we should be comforted by that, right?” Stiles asks. There’s a hint of a smile on his face, but it’s joyless and completely disingenuous.

“Unless it’s something worse,” the proctor says, definitely not instilling confidence.

Stiles’ lips flatten into a line of a smile. Then, he turns away from the proctor and back towards their group.

“Whatever it is, they’re taking it pretty seriously,” Malia says. She inclines her head like she’s listening, and Isaac does the same. Malia continues, “There’s a lot of cars and trucks out there.”

Isaac notices Stiles scratching over his neck and the side of his ribs. Isaac can’t tell if it’s Stiles’ usual brand of fidgeting or something worse. He’s distracted from the sight when a familiar voice reaches his ears. Isaac says, “Your dad’s with them.”

“All right, I should probably call him,” Stiles says, getting up from the desk he was perched on. He makes his way to the plastic tub of phones, flipping through the collection to find his own. He gets interrupted by the proctor again.

“Don’t bother,” he says. Stiles falls still, movements ceasing and eyes darting to the proctor, who adds, “They would have shut off any access to all outside communication by now. No cell service, no WiFi, no one starting a panic... Looks like we’re all just going to have to wait here and see what happens.”

The proctor wets the pad of his index finger, turning the page of his newspaper in a motion that’s far more sinister than it has any reason to be.

Stiles returns to his seat, appearing properly subdued now.

Isaac, in an attempt to ease the mood, says, “Well, hey, at least we don’t have to take the test today.”

Malia is the first to light up, eyes burning bright and an impressive grin spreading across her features. She pulls down with her right fist,

cheering a whispered, “Yes!”

Stiles is the next to smile, but it has nothing to do with the test. His eyes are locked on Malia, and, as her happiness grows, his expression turns fond and adoring. It’s sweet, if only a little sickeningly so.

Still, it’s better than a downtrodden Stiles, so Isaac sucks it up and lets them have their moment.

As they wait, the clock continues to *tick... tick... tick*. It marks each second since the CDC arrived and Scott departed. The clock counts out thirty more minutes before anything else happens.

Scott doesn’t return, but a CDC worker enters the classroom, announcing, “Everyone, please form a single file line. We’re going to need to get a blood sample from each of you. Thank you for your patience and cooperation.”

All at once, the students rise to their feet. Isaac takes advantage of the commotion, and, voice dipped low, tells Stiles, “I’m going to try to find Scott.”

Stiles nods, and Isaac ducks out of the classroom, moving into a more secluded hallway. There, almost entirely out of sight, Isaac pauses long enough to track Scott’s scent. It’s a little difficult to trace through the number of people within the building and the overpowering scent of antiseptic, but, eventually, Isaac gets a lock on Scott.

Then, he follows the scent towards the locker room. He finds Scott leaning forward with his hands pressing into the edge of the sink. His back is hunched, shoulders spread wide and breathing heavily.

Scott’s posture and panting aren’t what’s concerning. That much becomes clear the moment Scott turns around. His skin has gone clammy and pale with sweat glistening along his hairline, but, the worst part, is his pointed fangs and red glowing eyes.

“Scott? Are you okay?” Isaac asks. There’s a lisp to his voice. He hadn’t noticed it before, but, somewhere between the classroom and the locker room, his fangs popped. Isaac tries to pull them back into his gums, tries to retract the sharp points, but he can’t. In fact, all he manages to do is start up a sweat of his own and a flickering of his eyes from blue to gold.

Isaac can’t control the shift, and, by the looks of it, neither can Scott.

Scott stumbles over to Isaac, joining him between two rows of lockers. They don't speak, don't have the energy for it. They just collapse on the cold tile of the locker room floor. It's soothing to their heated skin, though the relief doesn't last long.

Together, they share in labored breaths and mutual discomfort. It came on so quickly. One minute, Isaac was fine, and, the next, he's feeling shaky and faint. Isaac rests his head against a locker, exposing the long line of his neck as his eyes flutter closed without his consent. It's a subconscious show of vulnerability and a testament to his trust in Scott.

Isaac doesn't know much time passes before someone finds them. It could have been a few minutes or even a few hours. Isaac doesn't know and he doesn't care.

The door to the locker room creaks open, followed by the sound of footsteps. Whoever it is moves slow and cautious until, eventually, they round the corner, coming into sight. It's Mr. Yukimura.

Scott has to heave the words out, like it takes all his strength just to say, "Get Stiles."

—

The pack gathers in the locker room, trying to assess the situation. Kira and Stiles both seem fine, but Isaac, Scott, and Malia are all struggling. Isaac can't keep his fangs at bay. Malia's claws are pierced through her fingers. And, while Scott has managed to reel his fangs back in, his eyes continue to fluctuate between deep brown and bright red.

"It's still happening," Mr. Yukimura says to Scott.

Malia, similarly sweaty, lifts her clawed hands and says, "I can't make them go back."

"Me neither," Isaac says. It's a vague statement, but his meaning is made obvious by the distortion of his voice. He's never really tried to speak with his fangs in his mouth. It's a strange sensation.

"Obviously, the virus is affecting the three of you in a way it won't hit any human being," Mr. Yukimura says.

"You guys have to stay out of sight," Stiles says, looking a little rough around the edges himself. "We have to quarantine you... from the

quarantine.”

“Yeah, but where? I mean, what if they get violent, like on a full moon?” Kira asks, looking around the group.

“We shouldn’t stay in here,” Scott says. “Not in the locker room.”

“Uh, a classroom is not gonna hold us,” Malia says.

“What about the basement?” Kira suggests.

“Too many ways out,” Scott counters. “We need something secure. Somewhere nobody will find us.”

“The vault,” Stiles mutters in a moment of genius. All eyes turn on him, recognizing the formation of a decent plan. A little louder, Stiles repeats, “The Hale vault.”

“The Hales always have an escape route, like their house,” Scott says, starting to gain some semblance of energy even through the effects of the virus.

“There has to be another entrance,” Isaac says, catching on. The Hale vault was secure enough to exist under the school for decades without ever getting broken into, or even being discovered. If they can find a way inside, it would be the perfect place to hide.

And so, the six of them meet in a deserted office, spreading the school’s blueprint over the desk. They start looking for their way in with Stiles trailing his finger over the page, “Okay, this is where the school sign is, so the vault’s gotta be right around here.”

“I suppose if there’s a second entrance, it would probably be accessible through the basement,” Mr. Yukimura says, but Isaac is only halfway listening. There’s a stifling warmth creeping along under his skin, like he’s burning from the inside out. It’s distracting, to say the least.

“It’s probably somewhere in the hallway,” Stiles says, pointing at the blueprint as his voice turns scratchy. He continues, “Or this corridor—”

Stiles drifts, dipping to the side and knocking against Mr. Yukimura. The teacher and Malia quickly reach out to steady Stiles, keeping him from crashing to the floor or passing out entirely.

Stiles gives a quiet and stunned, “Whoa.”

Mr. Yukimura doesn't let go of Stiles just yet. Instead, he pulls back the sleeve of Stiles' hoodie, revealing a marking similar to the one embossed in Sydney's skin. It's a spider web of red and purple, weaving anxiety around Isaac's heart.

"It's happening to you too," Mr. Yukimura says. "You're getting sick. You all are."

Mr. Yukimura directs his gaze over to his daughter. It's a pointed move, and Kira picks up on it. She defends herself, saying, "I don't feel sick."

Her heart rate doesn't change, but Isaac doesn't need the confirmation. Kira looks the same as usual, no damp or washed out skin. She looks perfectly fine.

"I think it's affecting you differently," her dad says. "Neurologically."

It's only then that a spark of fear begins to shine in Kira's eyes. She looks over at Scott, almost like she's hoping for his guidance or validation. Scott doesn't say a single word. His expression hardly changes.

However, Mr. Yukimura does elaborate, saying, "I found your test answer sheet in a pile with the others."

Mr. Yukimura takes out the piece of paper, unfolding and smoothing it down on the desk for everyone to see. The scantron is covered with the typical circle-shaped pencil marks, but they're scattered across the page nonsensically. Not a single answer bubble is filled in.

None of them are safe. The virus is affecting all of them.

—

With their collective health declining and a general location for the vault uncovered, the group – bar Mr. Yukimura – rush down to the basement. Once they enter the specific hallway, they begin searching over the walls and floors for any indicators of an entrance. There's clutter and cases lining the hallway, but it doesn't slow them down. Stiles finds something way quicker than any of them expected to.

"Hey, guys," he calls. Stiles' voice is still lacking his usual enthusiasm, but it doesn't stop him from waving them over to a metal shelf. "Over here."

Isaac and Scott work together to push the shelf out of the way, moving it up the hallway and revealing a triskele carved into the wall. It's looping around another symbol, one that looks like some sort of celtic knot. This one is made of metal, creating actual holes in the wall. This is it. The entrance.

"Look at the cracks in the wall," Isaac says. His fangs have started to pull back, leaving only half of each tooth pierced through. It makes it much easier to talk, though the lisp is still there.

Stiles points at the design at the center of the triskele. "It's like the entrance outside, it only opens with claws," he says. "Anyone's claws, right?"

Isaac gives a tiny shake of his head, one that can be seen only by Stiles and maybe Scott. It's not anyone's claws. The lock only works when opened by a Hale and, knowing the paranoia of their family, Isaac wouldn't be surprised if there was some sort of fail safe in place to keep other werewolves out.

Silent communication passes between Isaac, Stiles, and Scott as they quickly realize what has to happen. Malia has to be the one to open the vault.

"Um..." Scott turns away from the wall and, with predictably terrible acting, he asks, "Malia, can you try?"

"Why me?" Malia asks skeptically.

A little less forced but still stunted, Scott lifts his un-clawed hand, and says, "I don't have control."

"And what about Isaac?" Malia asks, eyebrows furrowed.

Isaac doesn't answer verbally, just copies Scott's movement, lifting his own blunt, human nails.

"Okay, I'll do it," Malia says, granting them a brief second of in-the-clear relief. The momentary calm is shattered when she adds, "But, first, tell me what you're hiding from me."

"What?" Stiles stammers, voice softer than a whisper. He looks from Malia to Scott, who's floundering just as much as Stiles.

"I know you think you're trying to protect me, but I can handle it," Malia says, head bobbing a bit as she speaks. She clasps her hands

together, using them to gesture forward as if to say, *go on*.

Scott and Stiles purposely avert Malia's gaze, staring down at the floor and making quick glances at each other out of the corner of their eyes. Isaac, however, just crosses his arms over his chest and watches as they try to dig themselves out of this one.

Fortunately for them, Malia loses patience and blurts, "I know I'm on the list."

The pull of anticipation is released, snapping like a rubber band.

Again, more silent conversation is shared between Scott and Stiles, discussion marked by a gesture from Scott, motioning for Stiles to play along.

He does, releasing a hushed, "Yes..."

Malia's body slumps just a bit, like she's not surprised by the information, but can't fight being discouraged by the definitive proof. Her head tilts back and to the side, staring up into unknown space, thinking. Then, after a moment, her head drops back into neutral and her eyebrows furrow as she asks, "So, how much?"

"How much what?" Stiles asks. For one of the smartest people Isaac knows, he really can be a real idiot sometimes.

"How much am I worth?" Malia clarifies.

"Four million," Scott says.

Isaac hasn't actually seen the final third of the list yet, meaning the information is brand new to him too. It makes him wonder what the criteria was for determining each person's monetary value. Isaac understands the highest amounts belonging to Scott, Lydia, and Derek (in that order). However, Isaac having the fifth highest prize doesn't make a lick of sense. Isaac shouldn't be worth eight million more than Malia, or five million more than Kira, or only one million short of Kate Argent's twelve. Isaac just doesn't get it. It seems so arbitrary.

"Are you okay?" Stiles asks Malia, taking a small step closer to her.

"Yeah," Malia says, like it's obvious. She seems completely unperturbed, rationale coming out as she says, "Scott's worth twenty, Isaac's eleven, and Kira's six. They'll take you guys out way before me."

Malia pushes past the group, walking right up to the vault entrance without a single shred of remorse.

“Progress. That’s progress,” Stiles mumbles. (When all this is over, Isaac’s going to buy him a dictionary.)

Malia holds her claws up to the lock, carefully sliding them into the rectangular gaps circling the knotted symbol. Isaac holds his breath, waiting for something terrible to happen. It doesn’t. There’s a green tinted spark and the sound of stone scraping, but nothing else. Malia doesn’t lose her fingers or release poison into the air. She just twists the lock in one direction and then the other before, slowly, she pushes the symbol forward. It sinks further into the cinder block, and the wall begins to open.

The stone wall rumbles and grinds against the floor as it slides open in the same way that a pocket door would. With every passing second, more of the vault comes into view until, eventually, the entire space is laid out before them.

The five of them step inside the deceptively large vault, meeting its impressive appearance with something akin to awe. Then, as soon as they’re all inside, the door closes on its own.

The majority of the pack members move further into the vault, exploring the foreign area. Isaac doesn’t go with them. He hangs back at the entrance, eyes slowly tracing over the expanse of the room and taking in the bigger picture. The space is like a time capsule, perfectly preserving the legacy of the Hales.

Isaac is so spent from the virus and so entranced by the vault that he hardly notices Stiles still standing at his side. That is, until Stiles opens his mouth, speaking close to a whisper, “Are you going to be okay in here?”

Isaac turns his attention over to Stiles, likely expressing his shock and appreciation in his eyes. He answers in a similarly soft volume, “Yeah, I’m good. It’s small spaces I don’t like. This isn’t small.”

“But what about in Mexico?” Stiles asks. He’s genuinely just curious, and, surprisingly, Isaac doesn’t mind letting him pry.

“There were extenuating circumstance,” Isaac says with a shrug, thinking about Derek gone missing and Scott taken away and tortured.

“And there aren’t right now?” Stiles asks.

Isaac loses some of his patience, ruffling incredulously, “Do you *want* me to lose control and attack you?”

Stiles grumbles, “I’m never checking on you again, you’re impossible.”

Isaac only smiles back, something smug and closer to a grimace than anything else. Stiles huffs, stalking away to go sit with Malia.

Isaac sees Scott sitting on a metal trunk closer to the door, and comes to join him. They sit in silence for at least two minutes before Scott asks, like he was building up to it, “What happened in Mexico?”

Isaac sighs. He reaches up to rub at the back of his neck, feeling a little bit embarrassed. “I had a bit of a panic attack when you and Kira were taken.”

“Oh,” Scott says. “Right.”

“Right,” Isaac repeats. “Stiles had to talk me down so I wouldn’t try to kill him.”

“You’re making me sound so selfish, Isaac,” Stiles calls from the other side of the vault, wrapped up in Malia. “I calmed you down so that you wouldn’t try to kill *any* of us – *including* you.” Then, he mutters under his breath, “Jackass.”

“Okay, sorry,” Isaac bites. “Stiles helped me out of the *kindness of his heart*.” The words are supposed to come out joking or exaggerated or sarcastic, but they don’t quite meet the mark.

“Well, whatever Stiles’ intentions, I’m glad you didn’t kill anyone,” Scott says.

“Me too,” Isaac nods. It shouldn’t mean much, but, somehow, it does. Somehow, it’s an important admittance, made true by the intense way Scott is looking at him. Isaac just hopes he likes what he sees.

—

“You know this is where it all started?” Stiles asks. His voice is rough and echoey, but his usually restless body is calm. Malia has fallen asleep in his embrace, and Stiles moves only to lightly caress her skin. It’s such a tender display of affection that Isaac has no choice but to avert his eyes, letting them drop down to his own shoes.

“That’s where the money was,” Stiles continues, pointing out a large

safe in the corner of the room. “117 million in bearer bonds.”

“How do you even change bearer bonds into cash?” Kira asks. She’s been pacing almost nonstop, but she finally comes to a pause, inspecting some of the other contents of the vault.

“The bank, I guess... They just let it sit here the whole time collecting dust,” Stiles says. “You know bearer bonds are basically extinct?”

“Why does it matter?” Kira asks, taking a seat on the stone floor.

Stiles tilts his head one way, and then the other. It’s a smooth, contemplative movement. “You know how many problems that money could solve?”

“For you?” Kira asks with zero tact, though any rudeness is unintentional.

Stiles’ eyebrows drop, like maybe he’s a little annoyed by the question, but he answers anyway, “Me, my dad... the Eichen House and MRI bills are crushing him.”

There’s a moment of quiet. Scott speaks through it. “Mom does this thing,” he says, rubbing his hand up and down his arm and scratching at the edge of his jawline, like maybe he’s uncomfortable with the topic. Still, he continues, “She writes down all the items in our budget and how much they cost, then she adds them all up and figures out how long we have until... we – we’d lose the house.”

The vault goes silent as the awake parties fall into a period of reflection.

Isaac doesn’t have a single penny to his name. The only job he’s ever worked was at the Lahey family cemetery, and all that money went into his father’s pocket. Isaac doesn’t know where the money went when his father died, but he knows he didn’t inherit any of it. And yet, despite this, Isaac hasn’t had to worry about money. At least, not since he was bitten. His dad never had much wealth and he definitely didn’t spend what little he did have on Isaac, but that time has passed. Now, Isaac lives with Derek, and he lives comfortably. He lives with privilege.

Derek has money, and, by extension, that means Isaac does too. Sure, none of it is technically his, but Isaac doesn’t have to worry about hospital bills or a roof over his head. Isaac doesn’t have to worry about his home being taken away from him. Not anymore, at least.

But, again, none of the money is Isaac's. Isaac doesn't want to leech off of Derek forever, even if the man in question wouldn't mind it. So, maybe, if this virus doesn't bring Isaac to his grave, he should find a way to earn his independence.

Isaac's safety isn't guaranteed, but neither is his death. Maybe he should stop waiting for the worst possible outcome, and start preparing for the best.

—

Isaac and Scott lean against the solid vault door, trying to listen in and get some idea of what's happening upstairs.

Isaac fine tunes his super-hearing as best he can, but all he's picking up on are Scott's steady breaths and the whirring of the AC unit somewhere above them. His energy is too depleted for the level of focus needed.

Isaac is the first to pull away from the wall. Stiles stands beside them, awaiting a verdict. Isaac gives his, sharing a small shake of his head to mean, *nothing*. The movement brings a blurriness to Isaac's vision. He blinks a few times in quick succession, attempting to clear away the dizziness clouding his mind.

"Anything, Scotty?" Stiles asks.

"They're looking for us," Scott says, having better luck than Isaac. (Isaac protects his own ego, blaming it on the alpha thing.) Scott keeps his ear pressed to the door a little longer. Then, lifts his head to say, "Someone's going to have to go out there."

They all know what Scott means by 'someone'. Isaac and Scott can't afford to leave, not when they don't have control of the shift. So, they turn to Stiles.

Stiles' eyes flick over to Malia. Isaac follows the movement, observing her current state. Malia is awake now, but only barely and she's definitely still suffering. She's breathing heavily, chest rocking up and down, body almost swaying with the motion. Kira sits at her side, offering the comfort of a hand on her shoulder and human presence through the illness.

The three boys look away from Malia, redirecting their attention back to each other. There's a small pause, then Scott whispers, "We need to tell her the truth about Peter. She's going to see the rest of the dead

pool eventually.”

It's bad timing, but Isaac blames that on the bleak reality of their current situation. The virus is getting worse and it's bringing all of them into a mindset of introspection. Scott doesn't like to keep secrets, and, with a credible threat bearing down on them, it's no wonder his guilt is multiplying.

Stiles doesn't have the same understanding as Isaac. Instead, his expression shifts into disgruntled surprise as he steps closer, speaking quiet but frenetic, “Try to remember that Peter's the one name not on that list. Which either makes him incredibly lucky or The Benefactor.”

Isaac didn't know that. He assumed Peter would be included in the last twelve names, especially after he was attacked by The Mute. (Though, really, it's not *that* shocking of a revelation. Peter would be the lucky bastard to come out of this unscathed, losing nothing more than money that he doesn't even need.)

“She finds out about him, she's going to go to him, you know she is. And then he's going to twist his way into her head like he does with *everyone*. Including us,” Stiles says, eyes taking on a fraught glimmer. “We let him walk around like nothing ever happened, like he's one of the good guys... Scott, he's *not* one of the good guys.”

Honestly, Stiles has a point. As much as Isaac thinks Malia deserves the truth – if it was him, he would want to know – it's more complicated than that. Peter isn't just an unsavory character. He's a bad person. He pretends to be good. He pretends to be on their side, but he's only ever watching his own back. He'll only ever get his hands bloody when it's his life or his power on the line.

Or, Isaac muses, when he's enacting brutal revenge. Visions of The Mute's mutilated body flash behind his eyelids, setting his stomach churning.

“If she finds out about him, she's gone,” Stiles says. His voice cracks, like the emotion is starting to get to him. He's scared, Isaac realizes. He's scared to lose Malia. “That's probably what he's waiting for, and then he wins, we *lose*.”

In an uncharacteristic display of pessimism, Scott says, “We're already losing.”

Then, he raises a hand. There's black blood pooling from Scott's nail beds, dripping down his fingers in rivulets of sick. It's an ominous

sight.

And so, with it becoming increasingly clear that this isn't a one-off occurrence but rather another assassination attempt, Stiles prepares to exit the vault. Isaac, Scott, and Kira return to their previous positions on the opposite side of the room, keeping their eyes low and trying to give Stiles and Malia some small iota of privacy in this moment.

Mostly, Isaac just tunes them out. It's not a difficult feat considering the thoughts racing through his mind: the implications of Peter not being on the dead pool, the knowledge that this virus will likely kill them without a cure, the lingering memory of Isaac's last words to Derek being *see you tomorrow*.

Isaac is so caught up in the whirlwind of anxiety that he doesn't even notice when Stiles leaves the room. In fact, all Isaac really notices is the numbing of his senses and the weakness flooding his frame.

The sickness keeps getting worse, and, the more time they spend down here, the more trapped Isaac feels. It's a spacious room, so it's not as bad as it could be, but it still troubles Isaac. His body has grown so fatigued that even moving his hands to stretch the joints of his fingers takes a herculean effort, bringing with it a dull pang of pain. Isaac feels trapped in the vault, but also in his body.

"Isaac?" Scott asks, voice feeble.

"Yeah?" Isaac whispers. He doesn't move, but he does let his eyes slide to the left, bringing Scott into his peripheral vision.

"Your heart's beating really fast," Scott says. The sentence is dragged out, spoken slowly as if Scott is struggling to string the words together in his mind or speak them into existence. It's probably a bit of both, honestly.

"mokay," Isaac says, slurred together in exhaustion and the persistent half drop of his canines.

"Stiles is going to figure it out," Scott says, though he doesn't sound too sure.

"What if he's too late?" Isaac asks. The blood has started to drip from his lips now too. Isaac can feel and smell and taste it. It's gross and he hates it, but he can't wipe it away. He doesn't have the energy to expend. So, instead, he speaks through the lisp and the blood in a mumble of, "I don't want to die down here. This is the lamest way to

die.”

Scott releases a light bubble of laughter. He places his hand on Isaac’s shoulder, squeezing gently as he says, “*When* we get out of here, I’ll start planning your dramatic hero’s death.”

“Thanks, Scott. Means a lot,” Isaac says. There’s no real emotion in his voice, it’s just something numb and tired and apathetic.

—

The longer Stiles is away, the worse things get. The exhaustion has overthrown Isaac’s awareness. It’s settled into his bones, causing an ache throughout his entire body. His head feels full of cotton, everything dull and distant. He feels cloudy and, while still fully awake, disconnected from his consciousness.

Next to him, Scott shifts, jarring Isaac who was, unknowingly, resting some of his weight along Scott’s side. Working with all his might, Isaac manages to sit up a little straighter, easing off of Scott.

Scott isn’t paying attention to Isaac though. His concentration is trained on Malia and the crinkling of paper in her hands.

“Malia,” Scott warns, somehow actually succeeding in getting up to his feet.

Malia unfolds the standard sheet of paper, and Isaac knows what it is. It’s the last third of the dead pool. The one that lists her as Malia Hale. It’s laid out right in front of her, damage seemingly irreversible.

That is, until Malia lifts her head, and says, “I can’t see.” She’s frantic, fear slipping into her voice. “I can’t see anything.”

As the words register, Isaac begins to realize that it’s not just vertigo or lightheadedness plaguing him. The corners of his vision are turning blurred and unfocused. Slowly, the fog is creeping into his line of sight and taking over completely.

Everything is hazy, the world blends together in such a way that Isaac can’t make sense of his surroundings. And yet, it doesn’t stop there. It keeps progressing. Blackness starts to form at his edges, and Isaac knows it’s only a matter of moments before it consumes him too.

“Scott,” Isaac breathes, pleading. He reaches out a hand, searching for Scott at his side, but he’s not there. All Isaac feels is cold metal. That’s

what does it for him.

All at once, Isaac curls in on himself as the darkness swallows him. He's transported back into the freezer, chained up and unable to find freedom. His body is the prison. He can't escape the affliction. He can't fight the blindness. He's trapped, claustrophobic in his own skin.

But it's not a fresh panic. It's the end of the night, when the fight has long since drained from his body. When he's trapped with bloody fingernails and bruised knuckles, when his eyes are puffy from crying and his throat scratched sore from screaming.

It's a silent, numb panic. It's resignation. It's defeat. It's hopeless.

Isaac closes his eyes to the world. He continues to make himself small, pulling all of his ridiculous height into something close to the fetal position. He dips his head forward, resting between the circle of his arms. And he breathes.

He lets everything else fall away. He ignores the pounding of his heart and the pain in his bones turning less dull and more searing. Isaac lets it burn through him, lets himself feel it. Pain is human, pain is alive. Isaac welcomes it. And he breathes.

He just breathes, trying to keep his lungs functioning, trying to keep the panic at a distance. Maybe, if Isaac stops showing how much he's affected, it will go away. Maybe it will stop. Maybe there will be mercy.

If Isaac can just be quiet. If Isaac can just be good. If Isaac can just breathe.

He's only faintly aware of the yelling outside the door. Isaac knows it's Stiles' voice, knows it's not danger, but his body doesn't care. His body hears his dad, hears curses and blame. *Your fault, your fault, your fault.*

Isaac knows it's Stiles, but it doesn't matter. His survival instincts are going haywire and, since he can't fight or flight, he freezes. He doesn't move a muscle, doesn't even twitch. He holds still and quiet and scared.

A stumbling movement passes Isaac, but he doesn't dare lift his head. He can't see anyway, it won't make any difference other than to expose his vulnerability. Isaac can't risk it. He can't fight back. He can only freeze and obey. He can only cower. He can only stay hidden. He

can only make himself small, so small that, maybe, he won't be noticed. So, maybe, he won't be hurt.

Then, there's a shattering of glass.

Isaac's entire body flinches, eyes shutting impossibly tighter and limbs pulling impossibly closer. Isaac's joints click and pop with the discomfort of contortion, but he hardly cares. He's waiting for the sharp sting of glass, waiting for the prick of pain.

It never comes.

Instead, all Isaac is hit with is the acrid smell of something earthy and damp, something coated with fruit gone bad. It's a horrible scent, the kind that sticks to your lungs and clogs your senses. It makes Isaac gag, but it's worth it because, as soon as Isaac breathes it in, his lucidity starts to mend.

Isaac opens his eyes, blinking to counteract the onslaught of stimulus. There's still a mist across his vision, fuzzy and unclear, but he's come up from the darkness. That's enough to convince Isaac to lift his head.

So, slowly, he does just that.

As the stone room comes into view, any lingering memories of the freezer slip back to their own vault in Isaac's mind, taking the pain and debility with them. For now.

Isaac starts to return to reality, though it remains *just* out of reach. Isaac is lost, not quite past or present, consciousness floating in the space between. He's out of alignment.

But then, there's a hand held out before him. Isaac follows the line of the extended arm up and up until he meets Scott's gaze. He looks worn down and tired, but alive. It's glittering in his brown eyes, a blink and you'll miss it spark of relief.

Isaac accepts the outstretched help and, as soon as their clammy hands meet, he crosses over into clarity, body and mind calibrated once more.

Scott, despite his own weakened state, guides Isaac to his feet. He uses their connected hands to pull Isaac a little closer, enough so that Scott can support his weight with an arm around his middle. Isaac leans in to touch just barely, just so.

And, with Scott out of his direct line of sight, Isaac notices Malia. She's walking straight out the vault door, head held high and not looking back. She's leaving Stiles knelt down on the ground. She's leaving Stiles with a face covered in a splatter of crimson that can only be one thing.

Beneath the blood, Stiles' face is sadness and heartbreak. He's holding the dead pool in his hands.

Malia saw it.

Isaac is still bleary and out of it – probably will be until he gets a good night's sleep or, at least, a shower. So, Scott insists on walking with him. He walks Isaac out of the vault, down the school hallways, and into the outside world. As soon as they step through the double doors, the fresh air floods Isaac's senses. The fog settled in his brain begins to clear, making way for sun warmed skin and crisp awareness.

Isaac can see Derek waiting for him and he can hear Agent McCall calling after Scott, but Scott makes no moves towards breaking contact. Instead, he scans his eyes over Isaac, almost seeming to pull him a little closer as he asks, "Are you okay? You kind of... disappeared on us in there."

"I'm alive," Isaac says, even though he knows Scott won't approve of the answer.

Predictably, Scott frowns and objects, "That's not very reassuring, Isaac."

Scott keeps staring Isaac down, waiting for him to say more. Isaac knows he could dodge the subject, knows he could make a quick escape, but, curiously, he finds he doesn't want to run.

"I guess, I – I kind of. I kind of went into my head when my vision went out," Isaac says. He doesn't mention the freezer, but he doesn't need to, not if the glint of recognition in Scott's eyes is anything to go by. "But... I'm fine now. Just might have some nightmares to deal with."

"If you do, you can call me," Scott says. There's that casual kindness again, the type Scott throws around like it doesn't cost him anything. Maybe it doesn't.

Isaac squints at him, “And if you’re asleep?”

Scott only shrugs. He pauses for a moment, eyes seeming to drift out of focus as he falls into thought. He takes in a deep breath, and, returning to Isaac, sighs, “That was really close.”

“But everyone’s okay,” Isaac says, trying to instill his voice with as much reassurance as he can muster. Then, he allows his tone to tint lighter, becoming something more humorous, “So... you better start planning my tragic demise.”

Scott laughs, small and soft and breathy. Isaac lets a smile ghost his own features.

Scott’s eyes flick away from Isaac’s, down to his feet then back up. He says, “You know you’ve still got black blood on your face?”

“Eh, I’ve looked worse,” Isaac says, genuine in his indifference. There’s so much unrest around them, Isaac doubts anyone else is going to notice anyway.

“Like when your werewolf form didn’t have eyebrows?” Scott teases.

“If I wasn’t so weak right now, I would punch you,” Isaac says without missing a beat. (Though, his heart does.)

Scott smiles. It’s bright and real despite the circumstance.

Quiet settles between them, but, still, Isaac doesn’t want to break it. He wants to stay here and bask in the sunshine and the bliss of relief. He doesn’t, just says, “Derek’s waiting.”

“Yeah, my dad is too,” Scott says.

It shouldn’t be this hard to part ways, but it goes against their every instinct. The animal inside wants to huddle together, wants to stick close after such a horrific and shared experience. It’s in their nature, and yet, they have to fight it.

So, they go. They don’t say goodbye, they don’t even properly cap the conversation. They just go. They split in opposite directions, Isaac making his way towards Derek’s car.

Isaac climbs inside with a quiet, “Hey.”

At first, Derek doesn’t say anything, only watches Isaac closely. It could just be that he’s checking for injuries and safety, but there’s an

intent look in his eyes that Isaac doesn't like.

Isaac is ready to complain, but, then, something stops him in his tracks. Derek's strange expression falls out of the forefront, later to be forgotten, replaced instead by a combination of scents that make Isaac's heart stutter. Gunpowder and blood.

"Did you come here right after being shot? Are you out of your mind?" Isaac exclaims, very aware that his voice is bordering on yelling.

"You were *dying*," Derek argues, quick to come to his own defense. "I had to prioritize! Besides, as bad as I might look right now, I assure you, you look so much worse."

A quiet sound of distress rumbles in Isaac's throat. He's frustrated and a little bit annoyed with Derek, but he also can't blame him. If the positions were flipped, Isaac would do the same. No matter his own state, Isaac would drop everything to come to Derek's aid.

Yes, Isaac is worried and, yes, he will be getting the whole story from Derek, but it can wait. Right now, he's exhausted and all he wants is to rest.

And so, Isaac says, "Just – Take me home?"

"Sure," Derek says. "But you're taking a shower right away. That reishi stuff smells disgusting."

Time of Death

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 4 episode 8

Word count: 8,979

The group circles the McCalls' kitchen table, four laptops set up and a plan starting to form.

"Is four enough?" Kira asks.

"Depends on how many cameras they have, but I think so," Stiles says.

"Are we really doing this?" Liam asks, sounding nervous and unsure.

"We're doing it," Scott says. "Tonight."

Isaac is glad at least one of them feels good about the plan because he certainly doesn't.

Liam doesn't seem convinced either, adding, "But isn't it kind of dangerous?"

"Yeah, it's *incredibly* dangerous, and borderline idiotic," Stiles says, like it's obvious.

"Have you guys done something like this before?" Liam asks. It's a genuine question, but, all things considered, it's pretty laughable.

"Something dangerous?" Stiles asks. "Or something idiotic?"

"I think it's a yes to both," Isaac says, cheeks lifting and eyes squinting. It's a familiar expression where Stiles is involved, one of exasperation and impatience. Though, these days, it's becoming less and less genuine.

Liam releases a small exhale, head tipping forward and avoiding eye contact. He's way out of his depth. Not only has he just been unexpectedly thrust into a whole new supernatural world, but, now, he's been incorporated into one of their ridiculous schemes. It would be a hard adjustment for anyone.

"You don't have to be part of it if you don't want to," Scott says,

lowering his gaze to try to make contact with Liam.

Liam allows it, locking eyes and turning defensive, "I'm not scared."

"Well, then you're borderline idiotic," Stiles says, placing a hand on Liam's shoulder and flashing him a fond sort of smile and a wink. Then, Stiles drops his hand, directing his next statement towards Scott and Isaac, "If we do this, we don't know what's coming for us. You know that, right?"

"How do we even know something's definitely coming?" Kira asks.

"Because the tape from Garrett's bag said visual confirmation required," Scott says. After Garrett tried to kill Brett, they found a mixtape from The Benefactor in his lacrosse bag. It provided them with just a little more insight into what they're dealing with, though it's still not much.

"Simon said the same thing. He couldn't be paid by The Benefactor until he had proof that you guys were dead," Stiles says, choosing not to mention that The Chemist said it with a gun to his head. Stiles' scent tints with anxiety, but it's so subtle Isaac might be the only one who notices.

"So, the idea is," Scott begins, "what if you kill someone on the dead pool, but you can't send the proof?"

"You don't get paid," Kira answers.

"But how does that get us any closer to The Benefactor?" Liam asks, not quite understanding.

"He still needs to know if the target is really dead," Scott explains.

"Especially if it's someone high on the list," Stiles adds, eyes flicking over to Scott. (Isaac really hates this plan.)

Liam nods, "So, if he wants visual confirmation..."

"He's going to have to come get it himself," Scott confirms.

—

Noshiko arrives at the McCall house, here to guide Kira in bringing Scott's heart to an almost stop. Scott is laid out on his bed with Kira and Noshiko standing over him. Isaac and Liam linger in the doorway, completely useless but not wanting to leave either.

Isaac *seriously* hates this plan, and he isn't the only one. Liam is pacing nervously, chin tucked close to his chest and worry coming off of him in waves.

"Are you guys totally sure about this?" Liam asks. He still thinks there's a chance they'll back out, still thinks they'll cave under the pressure. Isaac knows that it isn't going to happen. This is stupidly risky – completely irrational, honestly – but that hasn't stopped them before. Not when there are innocent lives at stake.

"It's going to be all right," Scott says. For someone about to become intimately familiar with the verge of death, Scott doesn't sound scared. He's calm and steady. Maybe it's because he's already close friends with the edge of life. Isaac certainly is.

"So, you've done this before, right?" Liam asks, voice shaky and directed towards Noshiko.

"I've seen it done," Noshiko says.

"Is – Is that just as good?" Liam falters. His lips twitch up in a nervous smile, like he's trying to maintain hope.

"No," Noshiko says without elaboration or apology.

"Mom," Kira exclaims, "you're not inspiring confidence."

"Good," Noshiko says firmly. "This is a terrible idea."

For once, Isaac actually agrees with her. He speaks up, hand raising, "Um, I'd like to second that motion."

"Do you want us to do this without you?" Kira asks, attention still pointed at her mom and completely ignoring Isaac's interruption. Though, Scott doesn't. Scott doesn't move a muscle, but he does meet Isaac's gaze. And, somehow, he manages to express confidence in nothing but his eyes. Isaac's head tilts back, soft sigh escaping his lips and his resolve crumbling. It was worth a shot.

The plan moves forward as Noshiko holds her arm out and says, "Put your hand over his heart."

Kira moves slowly, bringing her hand just above Scott's chest with only a hair's breadth between them. Things go still for a moment. There's a heavy tension in the air. They stand on the precipice, lingering in their very last chance to abort the mission.

Scott abruptly grabs Kira's wrist with both hands. "Hold on."

They take a step back from the edge.

Scott pushes up onto his elbows, turning to Noshiko, "What happens... while I'm out? Am I gonna feel anything?"

"It might feel like you're dreaming," Noshiko says, looking down at him.

"Good dreams or bad?" Scott asks, eyebrows pulling together just slightly.

"I suppose that depends on you," Noshiko says.

Scott's eyebrows lift and his mouth parts. He slumps back into bed, like he already knows exactly what that means. Isaac, with a depth of experience battling nightmares, sends him a sympathetic half smile.

Kira takes in a deep breath, shaking out her nerves and readying herself for what's to come. Once again, she extends her hand and holds it above Scott's heart. This time, they take the plunge.

Kira presses her palm to Scott's skin. She inhales, and, as she blows the air out, electricity sparks from her hand. It crackles and flashes around them, and Isaac has to look away. He can't watch. Isaac has been in Scott's position before. Isaac has been electrocuted until his heart stopped beating and his lungs stopped working. Isaac has been here, remembers it vividly, and he can't watch.

Isaac turns his head and squeezes his eyes shut. Isaac hears Scott's desperate, scraping gasp of breath. And then, he hears the silence that follows. Isaac can't see or feel the flashing lights against his eyelids, can't hear the crackling sparks. That's when Isaac opens his eyes.

Isaac still doesn't look at Scott. Instead, his attention falls onto Liam. He's staring at the bed with grave intensity, like he couldn't look away if he tried.

Despite his own fear, Isaac says, gently, "Liam."

Liam's neck turns in Isaac's direction, expression flooded with fresh, vibrant panic. He turns his intense gaze onto Isaac, seeming to beg him with his eyes, though for what, Isaac isn't sure.

Isaac takes a page out of Stiles' book, mimicking his earlier actions

and placing a hand on Liam's shoulder. Then, with as much conviction as he can gather, says, "Scott's going to be okay. He always is. He's – He's stubborn like that, doesn't give up easy."

Liam's panic doesn't vacate, but it does seem to dim into something a little more manageable, a little less all consuming.

"You guys do this all the time, don't you?" Liam asks.

"Oh yeah, like at least once a week," Isaac says. It's a true statement, but he inflects his voice with humor, trying to keep things light. "So, we know what we're doing." He pauses. "Most of the time."

Liam cracks a small smile, and nods, "Right."

Isaac returns the smile, letting himself be reassured by the notion. There might be professional assassins after them, but, at this point, they're professionals too. Professionals at survival, at saving lives, at fighting evil. They've done crazier things before, and they'll do crazier things once this is done.

Isaac, for some reason, was tasked with calling the ambulance. It's horrible planning, likely Stiles' fault. Isaac has never been a very good liar and he constantly fumbles his words and struggles to hold conversation. And yet, here he is, left alone in the McCall house while the others head to the hospital and begin prepping for stage two.

Now that he's alone, Isaac finally allows himself to look at Scott. Isaac knows what the plan is, knows Scott is supposed to appear dead, but it still comes as a shock. Scott's skin has already begun to pale, turning washed out and sickly. He's perfectly still too, not even a twitch of his fingers or eyelids.

He looks dead.

Staring at Scott, seeing the warmth drained out of his body, it's easy for Isaac to draw on the emotions needed.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"Um, my – my. Scott... My. He – He had an asthma attack and couldn't find his inhaler and he's not. He's not breathing. I need, I need help," Isaac says, words a complete mess. He should pull his eyes from Scott, he should take a breath, he should regain his composure.

He doesn't.

"Do you know your location?"

"Yeah, yeah. It's 821 Williamson Road," Isaac recites, speaking on autopilot while his attention stays locked on Scott. Isaac understands now why it was so hard for Liam to look away. Isaac is terrified that if he averts his eyes, even for just a second, then he'll never see Scott again. He'll never see him breathing. If this is Isaac's last look, then he wants to drink it all in. He doesn't want to waste it.

"The ambulance is on its way. Just hang tight, okay?"

As if Isaac could leave, as if he could possibly abandon Scott's side. Isaac isn't going anywhere.

"Okay," he says.

Isaac pockets his phone, doesn't even know if the line actually disconnects, can't be bothered to care. He takes a small step closer to the bed. Then another and another until Isaac is standing right above Scott. Slowly, he sits down on the edge of the mattress, keeping space between their bodies, not wanting to jar or hurt Scott. Even slower, Isaac reaches a hand out, laying it over Scott's.

His skin is cold to the touch, but Isaac tries not to let it scare him. Instead, he gently wraps his fingers around Scott's wrist, pressing his index and middle finger to his pulse point. Isaac holds still, doesn't want to miss it. He waits. And then, faint and almost undetectable, there's a heartbeat. *Scott's* heartbeat.

Isaac's next breath comes a little easier. He pulls his hand away and falls completely still. He whispers into the air, words unheard and thereby nonexistent, "You're not allowed to die, Scott. I need you."

It's not long before the blaring sirens reach Isaac's ears and the paramedics enter the house. Isaac is gently guided away from Scott's body. He goes willingly, though he does stretch out his fingers, letting the tips graze Scott's arm one last time.

Isaac stays quiet and numb as he's directed into the front of the ambulance. He does his best to ignore everything that's going on behind him. There's strong scents of antiseptic and loud clatters of equipment and frantic voices, not to mention the siren still going. Isaac tries to drown it all out. He tries to focus on the memory of Scott's wrist under his fingers, the dull heartbeat underneath. He tries

to let it soothe him, but it doesn't really work. His mind is still a frenzy, picturing Scott so cold and so still.

Isaac's only been in an ambulance once before, when Braeden saved him from the alpha pack. Back then, Isaac had been so entirely depleted that the trip had passed in a blur. It's not a blur now. It's in crisp focus, every second felt and experienced. It's so much worse being the passenger than it was being the patient.

But, like all things, eventually the ride comes to an end. The ambulance pulls up at the hospital and the misery eases.

Upon arrival, a sea of chaos and commotion begins to rage around them, allowing Isaac to be forgotten. He fades into the background, backing away completely unnoticed.

Isaac enters the hospital. He keeps his gaze low, but moves with quick and confident strides. He acts as if he's meant to be here, exuding a level of certainty that allows eyes to slip right over him. It turns him invisible, making it all too easy to duck inside the empty hospital room across the hall from the morgue.

There, Stiles, Kira, Liam, and Noshiko are lying in wait for him.

"You okay?" Stiles asks. His tone is casual, but there's a weight to his words and the eye contact that he initiates.

Isaac isn't okay, but he's trying to be. He just keeps reminding himself that this isn't real. Scott isn't actually dead. And, as long as there's breath in Isaac's lungs, he'll do whatever it takes to keep it that way. He'll do whatever it takes to keep Scott alive. To keep everyone alive.

And so, despite being shaken to his core, Isaac just says, "Yeah. I'm fine."

Stiles keeps looking at Isaac. His mouth twists to the side, eyebrows furrowing. He's inspecting Isaac. Isaac knows Stiles can see right through him. He's always been good at calling Isaac's bluff, has always been able to look past his carefully crafted mask. Though, right now, at this moment, Isaac doesn't know what Stiles is picking up on. Isaac is scared, but shouldn't Stiles be feeling it too? Shouldn't they be in the same boat? Shouldn't Stiles, as Scott's best friend and brother, be just as scared as Isaac? If not even more so?

Isaac feels knotted up and spread thin and a little out of balance. He feels numb and cold. He feels terrified.

It gets worse before it gets better. Isaac falls further into the darkness inside as Melissa's screams begin. Isaac knows it's fake, but it's hard to reconcile when Melissa sounds so genuinely and thoroughly destroyed. Her screams echo through the halls, loud and agonizing like they're being torn from her body.

The screams make Isaac's eyes water and his ears ring. They make his heart race and his lungs burn. Isaac wants it to stop. He never wants to hear Melissa like this ever again. Her usual softness has been replaced with something so harsh and painful. Isaac needs it to stop.

There's a brush against Isaac's shoulder. His eyes flit to the left, catching sight of Stiles. He's fidgeting next to Isaac. The fleeting touch could have been an accident, just a side effect of Stiles' attempt to self-soothe through his own discomfort. But then, Stiles' weight shifts to the right, and, again, his shoulder meets Isaac's in a gentle point of contact. This time, he doesn't pull away. He stays lightly pressed to Isaac, applying the smallest degree of pressure, only enough to feel it through their sleeves.

Isaac's gaze slides forward. He doesn't acknowledge the movement in words or eye contact. Instead, he leans just a little to the left, resting against Stiles just a little more. It's still the faintest of touches, but it's there and it's grounding.

They stay like that a while longer, finding comfort in each other even through the assault on their ears and hearts. They stay like that until Liam whispers past the cries.

"They just brought his body in," he says. Liam's standing at the door of the room, peering out the square window and keeping watch.

Stiles lifts his weight, pulling his arm away from Isaac's and moving closer to the door. "Is the coast clear?"

Liam nods, turning his head to look at the group, "Yeah, we need to move."

Liam goes first, taking on the most amount of risk since he's least likely to get in trouble if he's caught. It's one of the perks of having multiple parents working at the hospital, which just so happens to be the setting of so many supernatural events.

Liam steps out into the hallway. He pauses for a brief moment, looking in both directions and checking for any signs of oncoming persons. Then, when he's finished his surveillance, he pushes through

the double doors and disappears into the morgue.

Once Liam is inside, Isaac tunes his hearing. He tips his head forward, working overtime to drown out Melissa's persistent and dedicated performance. Through the noise, Isaac catches Liam's soft signal of, "All clear."

Isaac lifts his head, "We're good. Let's go."

The remaining four exit the room and dart across the hallway, quickly slipping into the morgue. Isaac makes it a single step inside before his movements halt. He's met with the sight of Scott's body. It sounds so dead to put it that way, but that's what it is. Scott's body is resting on an opened morgue drawer with a sheet draped over his waist, and it's horrible. Isaac thought he was prepared for the sight, thought he had turned numb to it, but this is grim. Here, in this room, in this context, Isaac can't bear the sight. It sends a chill down Isaac's spine, spreading through his limbs and lungs.

Stiles grabs Isaac's wrist, tugging, "Okay, Isaac, away from the window, please."

Isaac blinks. The shock fades, though the cold doesn't. Still, Isaac lets Stiles drag him further into the morgue, circling Scott alongside the others. Isaac tries not to look at him, tries to ignore the way his own heart seems to be fighting for every beat inside his chest.

In his stupor, Isaac hadn't realized it, but Melissa's sobs have quieted. And, in a matter of moments, she joins them in the morgue. She wipes tears from her eyes, taking deep breaths to reset her appearance. She walks up to Scott's body, observing him on the morgue table.

"I still hate this plan," Melissa says, finally looking up. Every part of Isaac agrees, but they're in it now. All they can do is keep pushing forward. Melissa continues, voice breaking, "I mean this is pretty significantly terrifying. He looks dead."

"Give me your hand," Noshiko says, holding out her own.

Melissa hesitates. She turns to Stiles, like she's looking to him for guidance. Stiles gives a small nod, placing a hand on her back, saying, "It's okay."

It's such a small moment, but, in the emotional weight of the day, Isaac can't help the way his heart clenches. There's a tender familiarity between Stiles and Melissa. It causes a feeling of longing to

lodge in Isaac's throat. He swallows it.

Melissa extends her hand, allowing Noshiko to position it over Scott's heart. Melissa's face twists, almost wincing like she wants to pull away, but she doesn't.

"Wait for it," Noshiko says, and Melissa does.

Isaac knows she's waiting for his heartbeat, and he knows when Melissa feels it. She releases a soft breath of relief, smile gracing her features. "Is that enough to keep a werewolf alive?"

"Enough for an alpha," Noshiko says.

"How much time do we have?" Melissa asks. She keeps her eyes distant, not fully making eye contact with anyone.

"Forty-five minutes," Noshiko says.

"What happens after that?" Melissa questions.

"I bring him back the same way," Kira says.

Melissa looks up again, attention switching between Kira and Noshiko. She clarifies, "No, I mean, what happens if he stays like this for longer than forty-five minutes?"

The room goes thick with tension.

"No one's told her?" Noshiko asks, bordering on exasperation.

It hadn't been their decision to make. It was Scott's. He made it abundantly clear that they couldn't tell Melissa of the risk. If they did, she would never go along with the plan, and they would be no closer to stopping The Benefactor. (Isaac had tried to argue the plan. He had tried to convince Scott that they couldn't do this without him. He had tried to convince Scott that, if he died, then they'd definitely be no closer to stopping The Benefactor. But, predictably, Scott had way too much faith in his friends, saying they would be just fine without him. Isaac had to walk away then.)

"What?" Melissa asks, voice going tight. "What happens after forty-five minutes?"

"He dies."

With the clock already ticking, they don't waste anymore time standing around. Isaac and Stiles race down to the hospital basement, meeting up with Argent. He has a computer set up, ready to send a message to The Benefactor. Isaac and Stiles stand on either side of him, watching as he types out: **Scott McCall dead. Payment requested.**

"That's your assassin speak?" Stiles asks, an arm held out in question and voice coated with disappointment.

"I said he's dead. What more do you want?" Argent asks, like he's maybe a little annoyed, but also genuinely doesn't see the problem.

"Well, it was a little *dry*," Stiles complains. "You could've said something like, 'target has been neutralized.' You know, 'the crow flies at midnight.' That's always cool."

Argent only hums in response.

"And, in this scenario, 'the crow' is who exactly?" Isaac asks, arms crossed over his chest and staring at Stiles expectantly.

Unfortunately for Isaac, the computer beeps with a reply, saving Stiles from coming up with an answer. The screen reads: **Visual confirmation is required.**

Stiles and Argent reach for the keyboard at the same time. Stiles pulls back, eyes going wide and gesturing to Argent in a way that means, *go ahead*. Argent repeats the gesture back to Stiles. Stiles hesitates a moment, then positions his hands over the keys as Argent says, "Type this: visual confirmation isn't possible. Police coming to claim body in forty minutes."

Immediately, an almost identical message follows: **Visual confirmation is required for payment.**

"Tell him number one on the list is dead. *I* killed him. And if the wire transfer isn't completed in forty minutes—" Argent cuts himself off, stepping in front of Stiles to take control of the keyboard and type the rest of the threat himself: **I'm coming after you.**

After that, they branch off. Isaac and Stiles stick together, taking the stairs up from the basement and into a secluded corner of one of the hospital's main levels. There, they meet with Liam and Kira, hiding out in a room with the blinds drawn shut. On the hospital bed, their four laptops are set up and ready to be enacted.

Meanwhile, Argent heads to the roof where he taps into the hospital's security system. They don't have to wait long for his call. It comes through Stiles' phone, who answers to hear Argent's hushed, *"I'm here. You ready?"*

"We're ready," Stiles confirms, speaking in a similarly low volume.

"Try it now," Argent says.

Stiles spares a glance at Isaac, then presses the enter key on his laptop. The screen in front of Stiles lights up first, then the other three follow suit, rippling to life and displaying black and white camera footage of familiar hospital hallways and a room of metal drawers.

"It worked," Stiles says, almost sounding surprised.

"Good. Stay put and signal me if you see anything."

Stiles agrees and the line disconnects. They settle in to wait.

—

Time stretches in strange directions. It slows, every minute feeling like hours as they wait and wait with no sign of movement or development. And yet, in the same breath, time seems to run like water down a drain, steadily swirling out of their reach.

It's only been nine minutes since they got the cameras up and running. They haven't even passed into double digits. But... there's also only twenty-eight minutes until Scott dies.

"Is that supposed to look like that?" Liam asks, pointing at one of the sections of his screen. The security footage cuts out, turning to static before switching off completely, square blank apart from the words **NO SIGNAL** written in the upper left corner.

"No. No, it's not," Stiles says, anxiety dripping into his words.

Kira peers over to see the screen, asking, "Where is that?"

"It's the roof," Stiles says. "Someone's gonna have to go check it out."

"I'll go," Kira says with no trace of indecision.

"Whoa, whoa," Stiles says, stopping her from running right then and there. "This might not be just a malfunction."

“That’s why I’m bringing this,” Kira says. She holds up her sword, expression bright in her confidence.

Stiles gives a small nod, though Kira is hardly paying attention. She’s already headed toward the door with Liam on her heels, saying, “I’m coming with you!”

“Okay, and you’re both coming right back! Immediately!” Stiles calls after their fleeting forms. He drops his head, deflating as he sighs, “Kids.”

Isaac can’t help the scoff of laughter it elicits. The sound catches Stiles’ attention. He looks up at Isaac quizzically, “What? You’re not gonna go with them, run directly into danger?”

Isaac doesn’t say anything. He has no plans of leaving Stiles unattended in this hospital. Not after all the horrors Isaac has witnessed here.

Stiles squints at him. Then, after a moment, his head leans back in a slow nod of understanding, “Oh. I see. You’re protecting me.”

Isaac shrugs, still not saying anything.

Stiles rolls his eyes. “You know, given our track record in this hospital, I’m probably safer on my own than I am with you.”

That pulls another small laugh out of Isaac. “You may have a point, but I’m still gonna take my chances.”

“Suit yourself,” Stiles says, returning his focus to the computers and shrugging like it really doesn’t matter to him.

Isaac knows that isn’t the case. Maybe Liam and Kira didn’t notice the way Stiles’ heart jumped at the mention of the roof, but Isaac did. Stiles tries so hard to keep his feelings hidden, but the two of them have never been very good at hiding things from each other, even when both of them wanted to. So, Isaac knows Stiles is struggling. He knows Stiles is reliving every terrible thing that happened here. Isaac knows because he is too. Under the surface, at the back of his mind, the memories are playing on a constant loop. Every time Isaac steps foot in this hospital, he remembers poison in his veins and electricity in his bones.

If Stiles wants to pretend it doesn’t matter, Isaac will let him. As long as Stiles lets Isaac stay at his side, pretending he has any control over

who lives and who dies.

And so, they play pretend, waiting in the hospital room as the countdown continues.

Seconds pass, fading into minutes. When they're down to twenty-five left, something in Stiles seems to snap. He scrubs his hand over his face, pulling his phone out of his pocket. He doesn't look at Isaac, doesn't say a word, just dials.

Isaac watches him curiously. He listens to the repetitive sound of the phone ringing. And ringing. And ringing. And—

“Why do I have to say my name? They called me first. Okay, fine. It’s Malia. Tell me what you want.”

Stiles drops his phone onto his keyboard without much care. He runs his hand through his hair, frustration and sadness palpable even without the chemosignals in the air.

“She’ll come around,” Isaac says, knowing that Stiles could easily turn around and lash out on him. Isaac is even preparing himself for it, but the outburst doesn't come.

Instead, Stiles keeps staring down at his own hands and says, “Yeah, I’m... I’m not so sure.”

“She will,” Isaac says. He doesn't know why he's so certain, but he is.

Stiles looks over at Isaac, frowning. “I fucked up.”

“Maybe,” Isaac shrugs. He doesn't bother to sugar coat it, Stiles deserves better than that. “But you had good intentions. You were trying to protect her.”

“Was I?” Stiles asks, and, tragically, it's a genuine question. He's been toyed with and used to the point where he doesn't feel safe even in his own mind. Stiles doesn't really trust anyone anymore, but he trusts himself least of all.

“Yes,” Isaac says without pause. He tacks on, “Besides, biological family is overrated. Malia will figure that out pretty quick.”

The beginnings of a smile appear in Stiles' eyes, but, then, out of nowhere, the power goes out. The light fades from the room, and Stiles' smile goes with it.

“Shit,” Stiles says, immediately looking to the laptops. All the screens have gone dark.

Isaac and Stiles share in a frantic glance before darting out into the hallway just as Argent passes by their room. He’s like a man on a mission, moving with consistent speed and focus. Meaning: he doesn’t see Isaac and Stiles coming. He does hear them though. Argent whips around without delay, gun pulled and aimed straight at them.

Isaac and Stiles both move on instinct. Stiles’ hands fly up in a sign of surrender while Isaac shoves him to the side. Stiles loses his balance, stumbling on his feet and barely managing to catch himself against the wall.

“Seriously?” Stiles groans once he’s steady on his feet again.

Isaac doesn’t verbalize it, but his face scrunches into an expression bordering on apologetic.

Stiles gives a small huff, and says to Argent, “The power’s out in the whole building. We lost all the cameras.”

“Stay with Scott. Text me if you see or hear anything,” Argent says. He holds up his wrist, revealing the countdown on his watch. Eighteen minutes.

—

“I told you we should have split up,” Stiles says.

They’ve been in the morgue for seven minutes and there’s no sign of anyone. No Argent, no Benefactor, no Kira. It’s just Isaac and Stiles, standing uselessly among flickering lights and the knowledge that Scott has six hundred and sixty seconds before he actually dies.

“Well, I hate to break it to you, but it’s a little too late for that and the crow flies in eleven minutes,” Isaac says, anxiety and frustration tinting his voice.

Stiles stops his pacing. “Wait. *Scott* is the crow? Where is he flying to? Heaven?”

“Stiles, I swear, just—” Isaac snaps, patience running thin. “Try calling Argent again.”

“All right, fine,” Stiles says, starting to pace again as his phone rings.

All the while, Stiles murmurs, “Come on, come on. Answer the phone. Answer the phone, Argent. Come on.” His volume rises, speaking emphatically, “Come on, Argent, answer the phone. Why are you not answering the phone?”

Just then, the question is answered. Argent is thrown through the double doors of the morgue, hitting the ground hard as he grunts out, “Stiles, Isaac, run.” He struggles to press himself up from the floor. “Get out of here.”

A woman steps into the morgue, bringing with her an air of tensy and drama. Isaac has only seen her once, only for a fleeting moment, but he knows who this is. It’s Kate.

(And if he didn’t know, Stiles’ just-seen-a-ghost expression would be enough of an indicator.)

Argent manages to get to his feet, joining Stiles and Isaac in their position guarding the morgue drawer. They’re all watching Kate, but her eyes are pinned only on Stiles. Isaac doesn’t like it.

Isaac angles his body just a hair in front of Stiles. It’s the barest of movements, but it’s not lost on Kate. She casts her eyes over Isaac, flicking up then down. Her lips slide into a cold smirk, one that makes discomfort churn in his stomach, insides twisting up like a Celtic knot.

Kate’s head tips to the side, “And who are you, handsome?”

For the first time, Isaac is getting a proper look at the woman that caused Derek so much pain. She took the fragile shell of a teenage boy who just lost his first love, and she destroyed him. The sight of her brings the burn of bile to his throat and turns his blood to acid. There’s a growl building in his chest, the weight of his body leaning forward. But then, a hand closes around his wrist.

“Don’t,” Argent says. He doesn’t look at Isaac. He’s keeping all of his attention locked on Kate, defenses raised and ready. Isaac sees fear in Argent’s eyes, and it’s enough to make him fall back, though it does nothing to dull the rage inside.

“Get out of the way,” Kate bites. “I’m taking the body.”

“Why? Visual confirmation?” Stiles asks. He should be terrified, but he isn’t. His eyes are wide in shock, but he’s not scared. And, somehow, that’s worse than seeing Argent afraid. Seeing the absolute lack of fear in Stiles sends Isaac’s heart racing.

Kate smirks, stepping closer, “Don’t worry, boys. I’m not The Benefactor.”

“Then what do you want with the body?” Argent asks. There’s the slightest quiver to his voice, but he doesn’t back down. He squeezes where he’s still holding Isaac’s wrist, then drops his hold. Isaac knows it’s a signal, knows Argent has something up his sleeve.

“I wish I could tell you,” Kate says, still approaching.

She takes a single step closer, and that’s when Argent lunges. He rushes at Kate, deflecting any of her attempts to stop him and easily getting a gun held under her chin.

Kate smiles humorlessly, “I *always* forget you carry two.”

Isaac and Stiles don’t dare move. They stay completely still, unable to risk causing an outburst from Kate. Not when Argent is so vulnerable and the timer is dwindling down to nothing.

“Back off!” Argent shouts.

“You sure you can pull that trigger fast enough?” Kate taunts, seeming pretty collected for someone with a gun held against her chin. Maybe that’s what happens to someone when they survive having their throat clawed out. Maybe that’s given her a skewed sense of invincibility.

“I don’t want to,” Argent says. There’s a hint of emotion in his tone. Isaac can’t imagine what this is like for Argent, seeing his sister return from the grave, but as someone unrecognizable.

“You’re not going to kill me,” Kate says, and Isaac has a feeling she’s right.

“And I’m not going to let you take his body,” Argent fights back, anger flaring.

Argent might not be ready to kill Kate, but he’s not going to let Scott die either. Isaac knows that much to be true. He’s not going to let Scott die, not when Allison loved him as much as she did. Not when Scott is Argent’s greatest connection to his daughter.

“Okay, well, obviously you guys have a lot to talk about, so maybe I saw some coffee, a vending machine outside,” Stiles says, scrambling to deescalate the situation as Argent and Kate continue to struggle against each other.

“Listen to me, Kate,” Argent grits out. “We have a plan.”

The plan is in shambles all around them. The Benefactor hasn’t shown up yet, and, whoever it is, isn’t likely to enter now that chaos has erupted. The plan isn’t going to work, but they still have time to pick up the pieces. They still have time to save Scott, but only if Kate leaves.

Kate *needs* to leave. She’s wasting the very precious seconds they have left and bringing Scott closer and closer to his demise. Isaac’s panic is steadily rising, gaining ground as the clock winds down.

“And if killing Scott was part of it, you’re worse than me,” Kate says. Isaac would really like to beg to differ. He’s not sure there’s anyone worse than Kate.

“He’s telling the truth. We’re trying to get to The Benefactor,” Stiles says. Isaac kind of wishes he would shut up and stop drawing attention to himself, but he also knows that’s not a skill in Stiles’ repertoire.

“If you *didn’t* notice, you’re on that list too. And worth more than most,” Argent spits the words out, almost like a warning.

“That’s why I’m here!” Kate says, volume rising for the first time since she entered the morgue.

“Then back off and let us do what we planned,” Argent says, voice on the edge of pleading.

Silence follows Argent’s words, accompanied only by the sound of heavy breathing and the winking of the lights above. Argent is still holding his gun to Kate’s throat, but, when she starts to turn his arm in her grip, he lets her. He lets her slowly bring his watch into view. Three minutes to go.

The anger drains from Argent’s voice, “Take the berserkers and go. Kate, please.” One more time, he says, “We have a plan.”

Isaac watches and waits. He knows this is it. Kate’s either going to turn and walk away, or she’s going to completely ruin everything. Isaac doesn’t really know Kate, doesn’t really know all that she’s done, but he knows which is more in her nature. He knows she’s more likely to stay, more likely to get in their way.

And yet, Kate drops Argent’s arm. She takes a step back. Argent keeps

his gun raised, but Kate doesn't strike. She walks away. She doesn't look back and she doesn't falter. It's like, somehow, she's still the one on top, still the one in charge. Maybe she is, maybe she's playing them like a fiddle, but Isaac doesn't care. All he cares about in this moment is Scott.

Argent waits a full ten seconds, making absolutely clear that Kate is gone before lowering his gun. When he does, he checks his watch and says, "Two and half minutes."

"Where the hell is Kira?" Isaac asks, ignoring the note of terror in his voice.

"She'll be here," Stiles says without hesitation. Isaac hopes he's right.

In the meantime, they pull open the morgue drawer, once again revealing Scott's body. He doesn't look any more dead than he did before, but he doesn't look more alive either. He's still pale and so, so cold. Isaac doesn't touch him, but he doesn't need to. The cold seems to radiate off of Scott, such a stark contrast to his usual state.

Isaac and Stiles stand side by side, staring down at Scott. They don't speak or even look at each other. They just stand there.

Isaac's hands squeeze into fists at his sides, blunt nails digging into his palms. He feels so powerless. He has no control. He's just a bystander, nothing more than a passenger. He's a victim of fate. There's no fighting it, there's no changing it. There's nothing Isaac can do but wait.

Isaac can't do anything, but Kira can. And, as the clock strikes down to twenty seconds, she crashes into the room. She's beat up and bruised from the fight on the roof, but she's here and she's made it just in time. She rushes right towards Scott's body, and they part like the red sea to let her through. She doesn't waste another second, just holds her hand over Scott's heart. The electricity escapes from her palm, transferring into Scott's skin and sinking into his chest.

Isaac trains his ears to Scott's heartbeat, but it's nonexistent. There's nothing. There's no life within him, there's just silence.

Then, the power hits. With a shock of electricity, Scott's heart beats. It thu-thumps in his chest, steady and strong though completely overshadowed by what comes next. All at once, Scott's eyes fly open, immediately lit up with frantic, panicked energy. His shoulders lift from the table as a shout escapes his lips, ripped from his body as he's

brutally yanked back from the brink. Scott is gasping, breathing life into his body, and Isaac is fighting tears.

Right away, Stiles pulls Scott into a hug. It's awkward, only because Stiles is still standing and Scott is still laying down in the morgue drawer, but it's heartwarming nonetheless. It's a tight hug, hands grappling on shoulders and patting on backs.

Scott leans back first. He doesn't give himself a chance to recover further, just launches right back into the plan and the state of the greater good, asking, "What happened? Did it work?"

It makes Isaac's eyes burn even worse, but he refuses to cry right now. It's just been a long night, that's all.

Scott is looking at them and no one is saying anything. No one wants to be the one to break it to Scott, no one wants to be the one to tell him he almost died for nothing. The Benefactor never showed up. The plan didn't work, and, now, they're no closer to stopping him than they were before.

Scott's eyes start to dim. They don't have to tell him. Their silence speaks volumes.

Suddenly, Liam blows into the room, pausing in the doorway and staring right at Kira.

"What?" she asks.

"It's your mother..." Liam says. He swallows, eyes flitting to the side. "She's hurt."

"What?" Kira repeats, turned weak and scared. She's already abandoning Scott's side, already making for the door. Liam goes with her, leading her to Noshiko.

Isaac should feel some degree of sympathy, but he doesn't have the energy inside him. He's pouring all of his energy into Scott, into the relief of seeing him alive. He's living and breathing, flesh and blood.

Isaac can fight his tears, but he can't fight his smile.

"I'm glad you're okay," Argent says, placing a hand on Scott's shoulder. He makes brief but poignant eye contact with each of them. He looks at Isaac last, meeting his gaze with a softness so unlike him. Argent is usually so gruff, all survival and fighter instinct, but this is

something else entirely. This makes Isaac's walls start to collapse. But then, Argent looks away and says, "I need to check for Kate's trail."

Argent leaves, and then Stiles and Isaac help Scott up from the table, giving him clothes to change into while they explain exactly what happened. They didn't get the outcome they were hoping for, but Isaac doesn't feel a shred of disappointment. They could have lost Scott tonight, but they didn't. Isaac will count that as a victory.

When there's no more information left to share, Stiles says, "I'll go find your mom, she's gonna want to see you."

Scott gives a nod, and Stiles exits, leaving Isaac and Scott alone in the morgue. For the first breath, it's quiet and still. But, in the second, Isaac reaches out and closes his fingers around Scott's wrist. It's an impulse move, but he doesn't regret it. He holds his fingers over Scott's pulse point, feeling his heart jump at the initial contact before it settles into an even rhythm. Scott's skin has thawed out, bleeding warmth into Isaac for the first time all night. It's like standing in the sunshine.

Scott looks up, eyes meeting Isaac's. For the first breath, it's quiet and still. But, in the second, Scott pulls Isaac into a hug. Isaac is surprised by the sudden action, would be lying if he said his heart didn't beat a little faster, but he doesn't fight it. He has no reason to fight it. He relishes in the rare affection, he welcomes it gladly.

Scott's arms wrap around Isaac almost desperately, like he's scared Isaac is going to disappear. The air around them goes rich with chemosignals, a mixture of fear and relief all at once. Isaac lets Scott take comfort from him, tries to give it back tenfold, tries to press it into Scott's skin.

It's not a very long hug. Scott is the one to break it, stumbling back a step and fixing his eyes to the ground as if embarrassed.

"Are you okay?" Isaac asks. There's no judgment in his voice, no anger or discomfort. Isaac doesn't outright say it, but he tries to convey in his tone and scent that, *it's okay, I don't mind, you can hug me.*

Scott's eyes lift. They lock with Isaac's again, and, this time, something calmer settles between them. The distress softens and the atmosphere loses its edge.

"I am now," Scott says. His heart rate doesn't change, just continues beating in his chest at regular intervals, each steady lub-dub a mark of

life. He's alive. Scott is so alive.

Then, Melissa runs into the morgue. She doesn't stop for even a second, runs straight towards her son and gets him into her embrace in record time. Isaac hears Melissa's crying and Scott's stuttered breath of, "*Mom.*"

Isaac's eyes go wet again, and he considers sneaking off, but, just when he's worked up enough nerve to make his escape, Melissa pulls back. There are tear tracks down her cheeks and her hair is fluffed up and messy, but it does nothing to undermine the heat of her glare. "You are *never* doing something like that *ever* again, you hear me?"

Scott smiles, almost laughing, "Okay, Mom."

"This isn't funny, Scott," she says, not letting up. She swivels her attention to Isaac, almost making him jump at the unexpected intensity. "And, you, if he ever tries to pull a stunt like—"

"Never again," Isaac interrupts, agreeing easily. "This was a terrible plan."

"Yes," Melissa softens, "thank you, Isaac."

Scott flashes Isaac a glare of his own, mouthing, "*Kiss up.*"

Isaac only smirks, something smug and familiar. There's so much warmth in Isaac's heart now. It settles right in the place reserved for Scott and Melissa, for this little family that Isaac isn't quite a part of, but that welcomed him with open arms.

When the high stakes of the reunion dissipate, Scott asks, "Is Kira's mom okay?"

Isaac will admit he might have forgotten Noshiko was hurt. Though, of course, Scott wouldn't.

"She's being taken to another hospital because of the power outage, but she'll be fine. Kira is going with her," Melissa says, making it clear in her tone that this isn't Scott's burden to carry. She doesn't let him address it anymore, instead saying, "You're going to have to stay here a while so the doctors can run some tests. You've made yourself something of a medical mystery."

Scott just says, "Okay."

As the night winds down, transitioning out of active chaos and into housekeeping, Scott seems to droop. His shoulders sag, but it's more of an internal shift. Isaac hopes it's just exhaustion from the evening's events. They can't afford to lose their fighting spirit now.

Isaac has his mouth parted open, about to offer to stay, when Melissa beats him to the punch. Her voice is firm, leaving no room for argument, "Go home and get some rest, Isaac."

Isaac glances from Melissa to Scott, who gives a brief nod, almost like permission. He's telling Isaac it's okay to go, but Isaac doesn't want to. Maybe it really is just exhaustion, but Isaac can't ignore the feeling that something's wrong. There's *something* in Scott's eyes. It's like a ring of darkness.

Still, Isaac doesn't really have a say in the matter. Melissa and Scott aren't going to let him stay, so he compromises with, "Call me later?"

"And if you're asleep?" Scott asks.

All Isaac does is shrug.

—

Isaac returns to the loft, finding Derek and Braeden in bed together. It's not a shocking turn of events, though it did happen faster than Isaac expected, especially considering they were both injured the last time Isaac saw them. Well, actually, that would probably explain the development.

Regardless, Isaac doesn't want to wake them, so he moves quick and quiet towards the spiral stairs.

"I'm not asleep," comes Derek's voice, making Isaac gasp. He stumbles at the base of the stairs, wavering in his movements. Derek speaks again, keeping his words hushed, "I couldn't sleep without knowing if you were safe. Did the plan work?"

"No," Isaac says, "but Scott didn't die. So."

"So," Derek repeats.

Then, because Isaac feels like he owes it to Derek to be honest, he says, "Kate showed up. Argent went after her, but I don't know if he'll find her."

"You saw her?" Derek asks, taking on a nervous edge. He shifts, like he wants to sit up, but doesn't want to wake Braeden.

"Yeah, but it's not like we stopped to introduce ourselves, so I don't think she knows who I am," Isaac says, trying to keep his own voice casual.

"Keep it that way," Derek says, and then, softer, "Good night, Isaac."

"Good night, Derek."

Isaac ascends the stairs to his bedroom. He makes quick work of readying himself for bed, even snuggling into the covers, but he doesn't let sleep take him under. Not yet. Isaac fights against his heavy eyelids and the comfort of his pillow, forcing himself to stay awake until Scott calls. Maybe on another night it wouldn't seem so important, but this isn't any other night.

And so, Isaac waits until his phone starts to buzz, answering after the very first ring. "Hey, Scott."

"Oh. Hi, Isaac. I really thought you would be asleep by now, it's been like two hours," Scott says with genuine surprise.

Isaac hadn't realized it'd been that long, but he doesn't mention it, just says, "How were the tests?"

"Liam's dad had a lot of questions, but the doctors were just sort of... stumped?" Scott says. Isaac can practically hear the shrug in his words.

"Makes sense," Isaac says, rolling over in bed. "I'm sorry the plan didn't work. All of that and we're still no closer to finding The Benefactor."

"Actually, I had a lot of time to think about it, and I'm not entirely convinced it didn't work," Scott says.

"What do you mean?"

"No one came and no one got visual confirmation, right?" Scott asks.

"Right," Isaac says, stretching the vowel in his confusion.

"That's why it might have worked. Think about it: who has the power to know when someone is dead, but doesn't have to see the body to know it happened?" Scott asks.

Suddenly, it clicks. “A banshee.”

“Exactly,” Scott says. *“I mean, I’m not saying I know who The Benefactor is or anything, but it’s a big clue, isn’t it?”*

“Yeah,” Isaac says, mind racing with the implications. “Yeah.” He hums. “It’s the motive I don’t get.”

“How do you mean?” Scott asks.

“Well, a banshee is supernatural, so why would they want to take out the rest of us?” Isaac asks.

“I have no idea. That’s the type of question you should be asking Lydia. Or Stiles,” Scott says.

Isaac laughs, something small and light, followed by, “Hey, give yourself some credit. You figured out it was a banshee.”

“For all we know Lydia figured that out while I was dead on the table,” Scott says with humor in his words.

Isaac pauses. He remembers something Noshiko said, about what it would be like for Scott when his heart slowed. It comes to Isaac like an epiphany, one he can’t ignore. His nonchalance is forced when he asks, “By the way, were they good dreams or bad?”

“Uh—” Scott says, and that’s really all Isaac needs, but he continues anyway, *“Bad. Definitely... bad.”*

It explains the darkness in Scott’s eyes. He wasn’t just tired, he was haunted.

“You wanna talk about it?” Isaac asks.

“It’s a lot,” Scott says. It isn’t an actual answer. It’s a cop out.

“I don’t mind,” Isaac says truthfully. Scott just risked his own life in an attempt to save every supernatural in Beacon Hills – Isaac included. The least he can do is allow Scott an outlet for the nightmares that plagued his mind. Isaac is more than willing to listen. He wants to help.

“Um. Well, I was basically just – I kept waking up in the morgue over and over. The Mute was there, and... I was supposed to kill him or someone else would die. And, each time, I – I came closer and closer to actually killing someone,” Scott says.

“Killing who?” Isaac asks. He doesn’t want to make Scott say it if he doesn’t want to, but he needs the clarification, doesn’t quite follow the thread.

“Liam, mostly.” Scott pauses. *“And you.”*

Isaac ignores the emotions tied to the statement, staying in the black and white of the dream to ask, “And did you ever do it?”

“I don’t know. I think maybe right before I really woke up I did?” Scott’s voice is shaking. *“I just, I couldn’t stop it, Isaac. I – I don’t want anyone else to die, but what if that’s what it comes down to? What if it’s kill someone or let Liam die? Or you? Or Stiles? Or...”* Scott trails off into silence.

“Do you want the reassuring answer or the real answer?” Isaac asks, genuine in his offer of both.

Scott stays quiet, like he’s really thinking it over. Eventually, he lands on, *“The real answer.”*

“Okay, well, the real answer is: it’s a possibility,” Isaac says. “But that doesn’t mean it’s inevitable. It doesn’t *have* to happen. You’re going to do everything you can to keep everyone alive, right?”

“Of course,” Scott says without hesitation.

“Then that’s what’s important. Scott, you’re not a monster and you’re certainly not a killer,” Isaac says. And it’s true. Scott is the furthest thing from a monster and even further from a killer. Scott breathes life into others. He saves every person he has the power to save and then some. He is so alive, and he shares that like a gift, like the unending warmth that surrounds him.

“Thank you,” Scott says.

“Anytime,” Isaac says. Then, after a beat of silence, “We should probably get some sleep. Sweet dreams or whatever.”

Scott laughs, *“You too. Or whatever.”*

Perishable

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 4 episode 9

Word count: 11,261

Chapter Notes

If you saw me accidentally post this for three minutes at 10 o'clock last night, no you didn't.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“The most important part is remembering that the knives are a pair. The movements need to feed into each other, like the left is an extension of the right,” Braeden says, demonstrating a sweeping pull of the daggers. “Once you’ve mastered the daggers together, then you can adapt to using only one. Try again.”

Braeden hands the knives back to Isaac. They’ve been at this for a few hours, couch and table pushed back against the walls while Braeden alternates between teaching Isaac and teaching Derek.

Derek is holding a gun. It’s a strange but welcome sight. Isaac’s glad Braeden is teaching Derek how to defend himself with human means. Isaac still has hope that they’ll restore his powers, but, in the meantime, Derek needs to be prepared. They can’t live in denial.

Isaac practices flipping the daggers around his fingers, pulling into a strike from the left and then the right. It’s a move Allison had done with ease. Isaac remembers how Allison moved with the daggers. They weren’t just an extension of each other, they were an extension of her. She was so connected to them, so in her element, that nothing could slip her focus.

Isaac definitely isn’t there yet. He’s clumsy and has dropped the daggers more times than he can count, but he doesn’t mind. He’s rooted himself in Allison Argent level determination. He refuses to give up. He’s going to learn this. Maybe it shouldn’t matter as much as it does, but this is Isaac’s greatest link to Allison. These ring daggers ran through their friendship like an invisible string, tying everything together.

Working with the daggers, Isaac feels closer to Allison than he has since... Well, since she died.

So, even though his fumbling movements don't seem to be improving, Isaac will keep trying. Even though his healing is working overtime to mend the rawness of his hands, Isaac will keep going. He will get it eventually, and then he'll carry Allison with him in more than just memory. He'll carry Allison into every fight. She'll continue to save his life.

"Take a break, Isaac," Derek's voice carries across the loft. It pulls Isaac out of his focused state, bringing him back into an awareness outside of daggers and reminiscence. Isaac finds that the sky is tinting orange and Derek's gun has been set aside in favor of a sandwich.

Okay, it might have been more than a few hours.

"You're gonna run yourself dry," Derek says. "Eat something."

There's a second plate and a second sandwich across from him. It's for Isaac, and it makes his heart swell. Isaac hadn't meant to get as caught up in the training as he did, but the Allison Argent determination is a strong force. Luckily, he has Derek looking out for him.

Isaac joins Derek at the table, taking a bite of the sandwich with a muffled, "Thank you."

Derek doesn't say anything, only rolls his eyes with a fond grin.

Braeden isn't sitting with them. She's standing a few feet away, cleaning one of her guns with deft movements. She's present, but behaving more like a fly on the wall, like maybe she doesn't want to get in the way. Or maybe she doesn't want to get too close.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Isaac asks her.

Braeden looks up, shrugs, and says, "Later."

Isaac nods, returning his attention to his meal. He can't make Braeden eat with them. He can't force her walls down, and he wouldn't want to even if he could. He only wants to extend the invitation, at least letting her know that she's welcome. She won't be getting in the way.

"You know, you don't have to master it all in one day," Derek says when Isaac's mouth is full of bread and deli meat.

Isaac glares at him, but it's a weak thing.

"He's not even close to mastering it," Braeden says, apparently not interested in eating, but having no issue insulting him. Isaac doesn't really mind. She's right, after all.

Isaac swallows his bite. "I want to learn."

Derek squints, "And you will. But how about a little bit of pacing?"

"Pacing is for people who don't have professional assassins coming after them," Isaac counters.

"He has a point," Braeden speaks again. Isaac smiles. He likes her.

"Thank you, Braeden," Isaac says, a smug glint in his eyes.

"I don't like this friendship thing that's starting," Derek says, finger flicking between the two of them.

"You're lying," Braeden says, stealing the words right out of Isaac's mouth. His smile grows.

Derek groans and Isaac laughs. The casual company is so... *nice*. They've had a few quiet days with no new assassins, and it's allowed them a slice of normalcy. The threat is still there, breathing down their necks at every turn, but they can indulge just a little. They can indulge in banter and shared meals. They can pretend their names aren't listed on a dead pool, they can pretend Derek isn't inexplicably losing his powers, they can pretend Kate isn't back from the dead.

They're staying diligent – hence the training – but the atmosphere is lighter.

When they're done eating, the sun has fully set. Derek's loft, a reflection of his broody nature, has minimal lighting, which means, "We'll have to pick this up another day," Braeden says. "It's not worth the energy spent if you can't see the techniques."

Isaac is a tad disappointed, but Derek might have a point about the pacing. They could still be attacked at any moment. Isaac should probably have a little energy left in the tank. Just in case.

"Thanks again for teaching me," Isaac says.

Braeden shrugs, "It's a good skill to brush up on." Then, "Besides, you're a better student than Derek. Much more applied."

“My dad is turning in his grave right now,” Isaac says with a full grin.

Braeden scoffs, “Yeah, see. I like you.”

Meanwhile, Derek isn’t as impressed, “Okay, Isaac, enough with the trauma jokes.”

“You know,” Isaac says, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms over his chest, “for someone with such a shitty past, I thought you’d appreciate my dark humor more.”

“Well, I’d say Laura is turning in her grave at that, but considering her body was cut in half...” Derek trails off.

It shocks a gasped sort of laugh out of Isaac, not expecting Derek to take the bait.

“Aw, you two are perfect for each other,” Braeden says. Her voice is laced with exaggeration, like she’s making fun of them, but all Isaac can think is: she’s right. Isaac and Derek had to go through hell to get where they are today, but maybe their resulting closeness makes it worth it. A silver lining through the storm of life in Beacon Hills.

Isaac doesn’t say that though. He doesn’t have to. Instead, he just says, “I’m gonna head up. Good night, guys.”

It’s still early, only just after sunset, but Isaac’s pretty sure it’s time to give Derek and Braeden some space. He doesn’t feel any guilt for spending the day with them. Derek made it abundantly clear that the loft is just as much Isaac’s home as it is Derek’s, and, though it had taken some adjustment, Isaac feels that now. He doesn’t feel like a guest. He doesn’t feel like a burden. And he definitely doesn’t feel like an intruder. Isaac really did enjoy spending the day as a unit, the three of them working together in comfortable camaraderie, but he also knows when to take a step back.

So, he takes his ring daggers and turns in for the night.

—

By the time Scott calls, it’s been a couple hours, but Isaac is still cradling one of the daggers in his hands. Braeden had fulfilled her promise and gotten Isaac a second, but, while they’re practically identical, Isaac still knows which one was Allison’s. He still holds it in his hands, tracing his fingers over the sharp blade and the circled handle.

When his phone rings, Isaac switches the dagger into one hand, answering, "Hey."

"Hi," there's movement on the other line, like Scott is bustling around his room, likely preparing for bed. *"How's your day been? I didn't hear from you."*

Isaac wonders if Scott tried to call or text him earlier. He's been so distracted that he probably wouldn't have noticed. Considering the danger all around them, it's definitely not the best move on his part, but it's too late to amend it now. So, Isaac just says, "Braeden started teaching me to fight with Chinese ring daggers."

There's a pause. It's Isaac's first time mentioning the daggers. He's not sure if Scott will even know what they mean to him.

But, of course, he does. Scott clears his throat. *"You – You haven't brought this up before, have you? I feel like it's not something I would forget, but."*

"No, you're not forgetting. I... Honestly, I wasn't sure if it was actually going to happen, and I don't know. It felt like something private at first," Isaac says.

"But it doesn't feel that way anymore?" Scott asks. Isaac can hear him settling into bed, covers rustling.

Isaac thinks for a moment. "It felt good today," he says. "Letting Derek and Braeden be part of it, I mean. It's still – It's still something that was only ours, like, no one other than Allison is ever going to be able to understand it fully. But, I guess I – I don't feel like I have to hold on so tightly anymore? Does that make sense?"

"Yeah," Scott says. *"Yeah, it does."*

"Sorry. I didn't mean to bring it up," Isaac says truthfully. He wanted to tell Scott about the daggers, but he didn't want to talk about her death.

"It's okay. It's actually... kinda nice to talk about her," Scott says, voice lilting almost like a question.

"Really?" Isaac asks.

"No one wants to say her name," Scott says. *"Sometimes I feel like we're pretending it didn't happen. I don't know if that's for me or for Stiles."*

“Both, probably,” Isaac says. Then, “I think about her all the time.”

“*Me too*,” Scott admits.

It’s not a bad thing. Though, it’s not necessarily good either. It’s an ache that can’t be soothed. Isaac has survived his whole life by ignoring the death around him. He coped by trying to forget, by turning numb to the world, but Allison woke him up. She died and Isaac’s grief came alive.

“Isaac?”

“Sorry, just thinking,” Isaac says.

“*About what?*” Scott asks, and he really does want to know, he really doesn’t mind talking about it.

“I’m trying to do it differently this time,” Isaac says. “I don’t want to ignore it.”

“*What do you mean?*”

Isaac pauses. He doesn’t exactly answer the question, doesn’t really know how, but he does say, “Learning to use the daggers is like... it’s like an expression of all that was left unfinished, y’know? Everything we never said and everything she had left to teach me. It’s like, if I learn this, then it all comes full circle. I don’t know, maybe it’s like closure?”

“*Like a way to say goodbye?*” Scott asks.

“Um. No, not really,” Isaac says. He’s trying not to look for goodbyes anymore. He’s never going to get to say goodbye to Allison or anyone else he’s lost. That moment has passed and he’s *trying* not to dwell on it. “It’s a way to keep her with me, I guess. Like, I don’t have to hold on so tight to her memory because I’ll always have this. I think – I think, for so long, I was held back by the idea of goodbye. It felt like an open wound because I never got to have that ending with–” Isaac sucks in a harsh breath. He’s thinking of his mom, his dad, of Erica, of Boyd, of Allison. Of Camden, most of all.

“*Maybe it’s not about ending*,” Scott says, slow and quiet. “*Maybe it’s about continuing. Just because they’re gone doesn’t mean you have to say goodbye. We don’t have to move on, we just have to move forward.*”

Scott puts it into words so well. Isaac’s next breath comes a little

shaky. It feels silly. He's been surrounded by death for the majority of his life. He should be better at it. He should be better at understanding it. Isaac thought he was. He thought he was an expert at handling grief, but all he's ever really done is suppress it. Allison's death unearthed everything Isaac has never allowed himself to feel. It's overwhelming, experiencing that all at once, but it's also healing. It's not so bad to remember.

"How are you moving forward?" Isaac asks, wanting to give Scott the same opportunity to share. If Scott wants to talk about Allison, then Isaac will listen. Because Scott's right. It's good to hear her name outside of his own internal monologue.

"Part of me will always be in love with Allison," Scott says. He says it with certainty, knowing it to be true. *"I told you before that I thought Allison and I would end up together, right? So, now... Now, I have to accept that I was wrong. At least to some extent. I won't spend my life with her, but she was my first love, and I'll spend my life loving her."*

"And that's enough?"

"I think it has to be," Scott says, a little less sure. *"When we broke up for good, Allison told me not to wait for her. In some way, she already told me exactly what she wanted for me and... I think I have to give her that."*

"That's kind of where I'm at too," Isaac says, finally setting the ring dagger down, placing it on his bedside table with a quiet knock of wood. "I know Allison could see something in me, and I know she wanted me to have more time, so I can't waste it. I have to keep going for her."

"I see it too," Scott says, but he doesn't elaborate and he doesn't let Isaac question it. Instead, he switches gears, *"But tell me more about the ring daggers, is it difficult?"*

Isaac smiles, "Well, *you* definitely don't have the coordination for it."

—

It's 3 AM. Isaac and Scott hung up half an hour ago, but Isaac can't sleep. He keeps thinking about something Scott said. About Stiles. About how they're pretending *it* didn't happen for Stiles' sake. But it's not just Allison's death they're avoiding. It's everything.

No one is talking about it, but they're thinking about it all the time. No one is talking about it, but they know Stiles is struggling. They've

all seen it in him. The way the light in his eyes remains dim and dull, the way the dark circles under his eyes haven't quite faded, the way he hesitates to speak like he never has before. They've all seen it. Or, at least, Isaac's seen it.

Isaac's seen it, but he hasn't said anything. He hasn't done anything. He hasn't tried to help, he hasn't offered support, and he really thinks he should. He really thinks he should reach out before it's too late. Isaac doesn't know what's coming. He doesn't know what darkness they're trending towards, but he can feel it.

And so, in an impulse fueled by the freedom of night, Isaac texts Stiles: **Do you want to hang out tomorrow?**

It's a little worrisome that Isaac isn't at all surprised when Stiles' response comes through almost immediately: **Why are you awake? It's 3 AM**

Isaac honestly doesn't know if Stiles is aware of his nightly calls with Scott, but he does know Stiles would tease him mercilessly if he brought it up now. Bringing it up would be like giving him permission, so Isaac avoids answering and repeats the question right back: **Why are you awake?**

Touché, Stiles responds. Followed by: **Why do you want to hang out?**

Isaac resists the urge to groan in frustration, if only because Derek and Braeden are downstairs and his phone call made enough noise for one night. Instead, he types out: **Because it's a Sunday and there haven't been any new assassins this week and I know you don't have anything better to do.**

Stiles' text reads: **Dude! Don't jinx it!**

Isaac's patience is wearing thin. He really is tired and he really does want Stiles to hurry up and agree. He messages: **Yes or no?**

Isaac has to wait three minutes for the next reply, watching Stiles' text bubble rise and fall. Eventually, a new string of words appears: **Fine. But we're not hanging out at the loft.**

It's a condition that Isaac is perfectly content agreeing with. No one has come to visit Isaac at the loft since he moved in and, for some reason, he wants to keep it that way. Just for a little bit longer.

Isaac doesn't wake until one o'clock in the afternoon. It's considerably later than he usually gets up, early rising ingrained in him from a young age, though Isaac doesn't care to start his day with such thoughts.

Isaac practically rolls out of bed and down the stairs, not even bothering to run a hand through his hair first. He finds Derek sitting on the couch and Braeden nowhere to be seen. Derek looks up from the book on his lap, and, when he speaks, it's teasing, "You know, you wouldn't sleep in so late if you weren't on the phone all night."

Isaac stills. Realistically, he knew there was no way Derek didn't know about the phone calls, but being confronted with it makes him squirm. He feels almost nervous, almost embarrassed.

"I'm not saying it to make fun of you," Derek says, noticing Isaac's shift in mood.

Isaac narrows his eyes, not buying that for a second. "Aren't you?"

Derek huffs, "Okay, maybe I am a little bit." He pauses. "Listen, I'm not scolding you and you can do whatever you want, but we do have to stay alert."

Isaac nods, but doesn't say anything else on the subject. The only word on his lips is *sorry* and Isaac doesn't want or need to say it. Instead, he just says, "I'm meeting with Stiles in a bit."

"Any particular reason?" Derek asks.

Isaac comes up with, "Trying to stay alert."

Isaac sits in Stiles' desk chair, trying to ignore the evidence board of murders and the memory of the last time he was in this bedroom. At least Stiles' chessboard has been packed away.

On the other side of the room, Stiles is lying in his bed and staring at the ceiling. He keeps readjusting his legs, hands fiddling over his stomach.

"Why are you really here?" Stiles asks. He doesn't look at Isaac.

Isaac swishes the question back and forth in his mind, easily landing

on, "Because we're friends."

"That can't be your answer for everything," Stiles argues. He turns his head to the side, not sitting up, but bringing Isaac into his field of vision.

"Why not?" Isaac asks.

"Because you're lying," Stiles says. "Did someone send you to check on me?"

The stubbornness reminds Isaac of Allison. Back before the ice baths, at the peak of the human sacrifices, when she was so insistent on doing it all on her own. Back when she didn't believe Isaac would want to check up on her of his own accord.

"I'm not lying," Isaac says, though he doesn't really expect Stiles to believe him either. He doesn't expect Stiles to trust him, not all the way, but he doesn't really care. He just continues with, "We don't have to talk about it, but I'm done acting like the world didn't just fall apart around us."

"If you hadn't noticed, that's definitely still happening," Stiles says. He sounds jaded and frustrated and tired.

"Okay, fine," Isaac says, "I'll give you that."

Stiles keeps watching Isaac. Neither of them say anything for a while. They just stare at each other. The eye contact isn't unpleasant or awkward, but Isaac still struggles not to break it.

Eventually, Stiles sits up, "Do you know what it's like to not be able to trust your own mind?"

Isaac's brief period of possession doesn't even cross his mind. All he thinks of is how every small space turns into that freezer. All he thinks of is the long nights locked inside, being driven right up to the edge.

"Yeah," Isaac says. "Maybe not in the same way, but yes."

Stiles looks at Isaac a little more, like he's weighing the answer, trying to decide if it's good enough. Isaac lets him.

After a long moment, Stiles says, "I *know* the nogitsune is gone, but I don't *feel* it. I feel like he's still in my head. I still have the nightmares. I still..." Stiles' voice fades off, like he loses his train of thought. He's

back to avoiding Isaac's gaze, attention trained on his fingers. He's studying them with purpose. "I still feel like I haven't woken up yet."

Isaac can see it. There's a disconnect. The nogitsune is gone, but it still has a hold on Stiles. They saved him. They brought him back. They banished the demon from his body, but he lost a part of himself in the process. Isaac doesn't know how to fix it. He's not sure if it can be fixed.

"Is there any way I can help?" Isaac asks. He hates that he has to ask. He wishes he could just *know*.

Stiles shrugs. He doesn't give an answer, probably doesn't have one. Instead, he says, "My body feels like it isn't mine anymore. I feel like a stranger to myself."

The words slam into Isaac like a ton of bricks.

"Have you been talking to anyone?" Isaac asks.

"Like who? Who is going to understand this? I feel mental. My dad... My dad hasn't looked at me the same since he dropped me off at Eichen. He's looking at me like I could drop dead at any moment, and Scott is too. And—" Stiles cuts himself off, tugging hard at his hair.

"Well, you can always talk to me, but," Isaac pauses, "what about Lydia?"

"Oh, the girl whose best friend and almost-boyfriend I killed? Great idea, Isaac," Stiles scoffs.

Isaac ignores him. He doesn't tell Stiles that he didn't kill them. Though it pains him not to, Isaac knows he's not going to be the one to convince Stiles of his innocence, knows that's something that will only come with time. Isaac knows that, right now, he needs to pick his battles. He needs to help Stiles realize he's not alone in this. So, he says, "Isn't Lydia the one Peter used to bring himself back to life? I don't know exactly what she went through, but she might be the only one who can actually *relate* to what you're experiencing."

Stiles sits up a little straighter. "I hadn't thought of that."

"If you hadn't noticed, you're surrounded by a very traumatized group of people, so at least one of us is bound to have a similar experience," Isaac says, edging into a lighter mood.

Stiles sighs. “Point taken.”

“So, you’ll consider talking to Lydia?” Isaac doesn’t ask Stiles to promise. He wants to, wants to hound it into Stiles, wants to make him do it. But Isaac can’t. He can only ask of Stiles what he knows he can’t refuse.

“Yeah, okay,” Stiles says.

“Cool,” Isaac says. Then, not ready to abandon him yet, he asks, “Do you wanna watch a movie?”

—

After an evening spent watching *Thor* and eating take out, Stiles drives Isaac back to the loft. It’s mostly quiet until Stiles asks, a little mockingly, “So, can I come up and see your room?”

“No,” Isaac says without hesitation.

“Uh! Why not?” Stiles complains.

“Because we’re not friends and I hate you,” Isaac says. He sounds grumpy, but it’s also a blatant lie.

It makes Stiles laugh, “Yeah, yeah. Love you too, buddy.”

Stiles is so casual about it. His eyes stay focused on the road, words shared like they’re nothing. They’re definitely *not* nothing.

Isaac can vividly remember the last time he heard those words. He was eleven years old and Camden was set to ship out the next day. Camden had snuck into Isaac’s room, well after midnight when Dad was passed out and snoring. He had woken Isaac with gentle hands, saying their own goodbye. He ruffled Isaac’s hair when he said it, and Isaac had been trying not to cry because he was eleven and he was too old for that.

The next day, Isaac watched Cam leave. He didn’t say it again, not in front of Dad and not in the three letters sent. But he didn’t have to say it. Isaac knew. Isaac still knows. He can still hear those whispered words. *I love you.*

“Isaac?” Stiles asks.

The Jeep is parked in front of the loft and Stiles is staring at him.

"I haven't heard that in a long time," Isaac says. He can admit it to Stiles. Stiles won't be weird about it. He won't get it, Isaac knows. It's easy for Stiles to say the words, and even easier for him to hear them. The words are a constant in Stiles' life, shared between family and between friends. Stiles won't get it, but he won't judge.

"How long is a long time?" Stiles asks because he's chronically curious and doesn't consider the potential harm. Isaac doesn't fault him for it. Stiles grew up in a house where questions were encouraged. It's turned him insufferable, but not ill intentioned. It's just the way Stiles is. It's a side effect of his friendship, and Isaac can suffer the emotional damage if it means keeping Stiles close.

"Almost six years," Isaac says.

"Are you serious?" Stiles asks, as if Isaac would have reason to joke or lie about this. "Your dad stopped saying 'I love you' when you were eleven?"

And, *oh*. That one hurts. It's like a knife to the heart. Isaac knows Stiles doesn't mean to do it, doesn't mean to find Isaac's weakest point and take aim. Isaac knows Stiles doesn't mean to bleed him dry with a single question, but that doesn't stop Isaac from turning hollow.

It doesn't make it hurt any less, but it does stop Isaac from punching back. He just says, "No. It was my brother."

Isaac can see the moment Stiles realizes the meaning behind the words. He sees the moment when Stiles realizes Isaac's father stopped saying 'I love you' long before the fifth grade. He hears it in Stiles' exhale of, "Shit."

"Yeah." There's nothing else to say.

Stiles looks at him. It's like he's recalculating. He's taking the new information and sliding it into place, he's filling in the blanks and reading between the lines. He's changing his perception of Isaac until, eventually, he's satisfied.

Then, still far too casual, Stiles says, "Well, fuck that. I love you." He mimes checking a watch on his bare wrist, "Aaand... *there*. Now you've heard it six seconds ago."

Isaac can't help his laugh, even if it is a little wet. The words taste foreign on his tongue, but he manages a stilted, "Um. Love you too."

Stiles grins, “Great. That’s great.”

He sounds so encouraging, almost like he’s proud of Isaac. Isaac ignores the way that makes his stomach tighten, and says, “Thanks for the ride.”

Stiles nods, “Thanks for checking on me.”

And then, that’s it. Isaac gets out of the Jeep and Stiles waves as he drives away.

—

When Isaac’s phone rings, it’s Scott, but he isn’t calling for their usual nightly chat. There was another assassination attempt. This time, against Deputy Parrish. Scott and Lydia are looking for Derek’s help. (Apparently, Derek still hasn’t learned how to answer his phone for anyone other than Isaac.)

Now, less than half an hour later, Parrish stands in the middle of the loft, circled by Isaac, Scott, Lydia, and Derek. Isaac’s time without any friends visiting the loft comes to a jarring end.

As the story is told, it becomes increasingly obvious why it was Derek’s expertise they sought out. Isaac tries not to think about it, tries not to think about Derek’s personal experience with the burning alive of supernaturals. Instead, Isaac watches as Derek gently holds Parrish’s extended hands, turning them over to inspect the damage. Or, in this case, the lack thereof.

“He covered you in gasoline?” Derek questions, flipping Parrish’s hands to inspect both sides.

Parrish nods, but doesn’t say anything.

Lydia does though. “It’s the hair and nails, isn’t it?” she asks, looking up at Derek. “The – The parts of the body that are essentially dead.”

“Well, they should be gone,” Derek says.

“I was set on *fire*,” Parrish argues, hand pointing at his chest. “*All* of me should be gone.”

“Not if you’re like us,” Scott says. His arms are crossed, but his demeanor is calm and his tone is light.

“Like you?” Parrish asks.

Derek ignores him. To Scott, he says, “I don’t think he’s like us.”

Lydia’s eyes glimmer with fascination, asking, “Then what is he?”

He’s something. If surviving being set on fire wasn’t proof enough, then his name on the second third of the dead pool certainly is.

“Sorry, but I have no idea,” Derek says.

“But you knew about Jackson and Kira,” Scott says. From the outside, it could sound accusatory or distrusting, but Isaac knows it isn’t. It’s imploring, maybe even a little desperate.

Derek turns to Scott, just on the edge of offended. “*This* is a little out of my experience. There might be something in the bestiary. Did you try Argent?”

“I don’t know where he is,” Scott says. Argent hasn’t been seen since he followed Kate after the night at the hospital. It’s concerning, but Isaac trusts Argent. He can take care of himself.

“Okay, hold on. What’s a bestiary?” Parrish asks, only to almost immediately back pedal. “Actually, that’s not even my first question. Just... Just tell me one thing: are all of you like Lydia?” Isaac and Derek lock eyes as they wait for Parrish’s elaboration. Met with silence, he adds, “Are you all psychic?”

Isaac has to very quickly tear his gaze away from Derek, unable to maintain eye contact while also trying not to laugh. He turns his head into his own shoulder, stifling the small bubble of amusement that escapes. It’s not the question that’s funny, not really. It’s the look of exasperation in Derek’s eyes, one that seems to say, *are you hearing this guy?*

Derek doesn’t say the former out loud, but he does give a bewildered and marginally judgmental, “Psychic?”

“Yeah,” Parrish says with full confidence.

Isaac pulls himself together, returning his attention to the circle as Scott says, “Not exactly.”

“Okay...” Parrish says slowly, glancing between Scott and Derek. “Then, what are you?”

Scott looks to Derek. Despite his established status as an alpha, Scott

still looks to Derek for his guidance and approval. The sight warms something in Isaac's heart, though the feeling fades to the background as he focuses on Derek's response. It comes in the form of a gesture, a tilt of his head and a lift of his eyebrows. It's relinquished control, it's permission, it's trust in Scott's judgment.

Scott gives a small nod of his own, and then, the tension starts to build. It billows around them as Scott prepares for the big reveal, eyes falling shut and turning to face Parrish dead on.

Then, Scott opens his eyes. They glow red.

Just like that, Parrish joins the steadily growing number of Beacon Hills residents in the know. Just like that, he steps inside the world of the supernatural. Just like that, he has a lot of questions and they have a lot of explaining to do.

It begins with werewolves, then banshees, a brief mention of kanimas and kitsunes, and into the dead pool. Parrish sits on the loft couch, taking in the whirlwind of information with a shocking lack of doubt. Though, maybe that's because he's already one of them. He might not have known it, it might not have been spelled out to him before now, but he has that foundation. He is supernatural.

"What's a kanima?" Parrish asks.

There's a split second pause. Isaac catches an exchange between Scott and Lydia. Lydia's eyebrows are raised, signaling with her features that it's time to push the conversation forward. They need to double down on the dead pool. They need to emphasize and communicate the threat that Parrish is under.

"We'll get back to that," Scott says, moving to sit on the arm of the couch. He's got his shoes on the cushion, and Isaac doesn't care, but he can't stop his attention from drifting to Derek. Derek spares him a glance out of the corner of his eye, a warning that means, *don't say a word*. Isaac doesn't, but only because Scott continues, saying, "Just know that everyone like us – everyone with some kind of supernatural ability – is on the dead pool."

"But *I* don't even know what I am," Parrish claims.

"I'm... pretty sure they don't care," Derek says, not showing much sympathy.

Parrish's attention swivels to Derek, craning his neck to ask, "How

many professional assassins are we talking about?"

Lydia answers, voice grave, "We're starting to lose count."

It's the scary, but undeniable truth.

"But is it still *just* professionals?" Scott asks. And, somehow, that's even scarier.

"I don't think Haigh's ever tried anything like this before," Parrish says, eyes moving minutely, like he's remembering it. "I think he was taking a chance."

"That means *anyone* with the dead pool could take a chance," Derek says.

"But if Haigh had it, then who else does?" Parrish asks. The atmosphere strains against the rising dread, pulling taut and making them all a little rigid. "How easy is it to get this thing now?"

If the growing number of professional assassins had been a daunting threat, then the dead pool falling into the hands of the general public spells out certain doom. Anyone can be motivated by money. It's a dangerous prize and it's looming over each of them.

"So," Isaac says, looking around, "what do we do?"

"We proceed with caution," Derek says. "Assume everyone has seen the dead pool."

"And we try to find out who The Benefactor is as quickly as possible," Scott adds.

Isaac nods, but his focus has fallen to Lydia. She's turned her back on the group, staring out the loft window. Her eyes are distant, like she's lost in thought, wrapped up in the racing of her own mind. Her wheels are spinning, and Isaac can see it.

"Lydia?" he asks.

She turns, abrupt and a little sudden. Speaking to Scott, she says, "Remember what you said about The Benefactor being a banshee?"

It's the only thing Isaac feels sure of at the moment. It's the only hypothesis that makes sense, the only explanation for The Benefactor's all knowing capabilities.

“Yeah,” Scott says. He gets up from the couch, stepping closer, question in his eyes and the forward slant of his weight.

“I think you were right,” Lydia says. She moves, slowly taking a seat on the edge of Derek’s bed. The energy around her goes funny, like the chemosignals have fallen slack when they’re supposed to be held tight.

“I think it started with Meredith,” Lydia starts. “Meredith was only at my grandmother’s lake house once... but I think once was enough.”

“How did your grandmother know her?” Derek asks.

“She didn’t,” Lydia says, hands clasped in her lap and peering up at him. “She *found* her.” Derek’s eyebrows furrow. Lydia adds, “Because of another woman named Maddy. The woman she loved.”

Lydia pulls an item from her bag. It’s a photograph, Isaac realizes. She holds it gently in her hands, exhaling through her nose and smiling with careful consideration.

“I never met her.” Lydia stands, approaching Scott, heels clicking soft as she holds out the photograph. Contemplative, she says, “But I saw her name everywhere.” The quiet smile lingers. “She used to be part of a... yacht racing team. There were plaques and trophies in the lake house from all the regattas she’d won.”

Standing too, Parrish asks, “How’d she die?”

“*How’s* not the story. It’s what happened right before,” Lydia says, eyes going blank and body going still. “My grandmother, Lorraine, used to work in San Francisco for IBM.” Lydia’s mouth twists, and it’s almost another smile, but without any feeling. She turns, facing the window once more. “She was there on a weekend, catching up on work.” Lydia paces. “She started hearing this... *sound*. Like *rain*. But, when she looked out the windows, all she saw was blue sky.”

They’re watching Lydia closely, hanging on her every word, waiting for the moment when they understand the gravity of what she’s feeling.

“But she kept hearing the rain?” Scott asks.

“And it just kept getting louder,” Lydia whispers. She turns on Scott. “Rain and thunder, cracking like *gunshots* in her head. So loud... she finally just screamed.”

“Like a banshee,” Derek says.

Lydia doesn’t acknowledge him, just keeps going. “She called Maddy, who was planning on,” Lydia takes a deep breath, “taking one of the boats out on the lake. But Maddy said that the sun was shining there too... so Lorraine didn’t say anything.”

“There was an accident?” Parrish asks, like he’s just starting to catch on, like it hadn’t been obvious from the beginning that this was a story of tragedy.

“It took them four days to find Maddy’s body,” Lydia murmurs, airy and detached. But, when she continues, her voice is stronger, “And then it took *decades* to figure out how Lorraine knew. She started with parapsychologists, like the PhD in their name made it more scientific. They built the study in the lake house according to every pseudoscience theory they could find.” Lydia shakes her head. “None of it worked.”

This is a story about Lydia’s grandmother, but it’s her story too. It’s a trauma passed down, skipping a generation and falling on Lydia’s shoulders.

“Then, she started getting into more extreme occult, things like medium and psychics. *All* of them were failures,” Lydia says, volume steadily raising until, suddenly, it drops. “Until Meredith.” Lydia swallows. “They found her at Eichen House. This fragile girl who didn’t understand the things she heard. They brought her to the study... and they almost killed her.”

There are tears running down Lydia’s cheeks now, but no one stops her. They let her keep talking. They let her keep brutalizing herself. They let her because they have to know. They need to hear the *whole* story.

“She was hospitalized for over a year. She—” Lydia’s voice cracks, head shaking and sniffing, “never really recovered. My grandmother drove her insane, and I drove her to suicide. And all she ever wanted to do was help.”

Isaac wants to say something, wants to comfort Lydia in some way, but there’s no words to be spoken. There’s only a lump in his throat as Lydia dries her eyes.

Then, Lydia brings out a sheet of paper. They gather around her and the metal table as she unfolds the lined page, smoothing it out. It’s full

of jumbled words, letters, and symbols.

“We know my grandmother created the code for the dead pool, but I think she’s the banshee who put the names out in the first place,” Lydia says. She slides the paper across the table, positioning it in front of Scott. “She left me this message in the same code.”

“But she didn’t leave a cipher key, did she?” Scott asks.

Predictably, Lydia shakes her head.

—

Parrish and Lydia leave. Lydia is going to meet up with Stiles, hopefully checking in on him after the incident at the sheriff’s station. Stilinski is set to make a full recovery, but it’s still a harsh blow. Isaac only hopes that Stiles takes the opportunity to close the distance between himself and Lydia, accepting her help and support.

Though they arrived together, Scott doesn’t leave with them. He lingers in the loft. Isaac sits on Derek’s bed, watching him. Scott comes closer, but he’s not looking at Isaac. It takes Isaac half a second to clock what’s grabbed Scott’s notice.

On the bed, nestled just slightly under Derek’s jacket, is a gun.

Scott approaches, leaning down to pick it up. Isaac stands. He feels like he should say something, but he’s unsure which secrets are his to share and which are his to keep.

“Careful with that,” Derek says, appearing from behind Scott.

Scott looks at Derek. His eyes widen a little like he’s been caught, but, mostly, he stays steady.

“I thought you didn’t like guns,” Scott says. It’s not a question, but his voice flicks up like it could be.

Derek doesn’t say anything, only holds out his palm. Scott passes over the weapon. Derek takes it, slowly turning it in his hand, gaze fixated on the gun and nothing else.

“Does this have something to do with your eyes?” Scott asks. It’s only somewhat of a surprise. Scott, alongside Isaac, had seen Derek’s eyes glow gold the night they brought him back from his teenage body. Honestly, what’s more surprising than the question, is how long Scott

waited to ask it.

“My eyes, my strength, the healing...” Derek doesn’t look up. Isaac recognizes the admittance of perceived weakness as a point of vulnerability, one that Derek struggles to share with Scott. Isaac doesn’t think it’s about a lack of trust though, thinks it’s more of an embarrassment at the role reversal between them. Still, Derek does look at Isaac when he says, “All of it.”

“Gone?” Scott asks, full of disbelief.

“Whatever Kate did to me,” Derek says, eyes finally shifting to Scott, “it’s still happening.”

Derek moves to set the gun aside, but Isaac’s not paying attention to the movement. He’s been captured by Scott. Scott’s hands are intertwined in front of his sternum, thumbs twiddling and fingers sliding together. His mouth is parted open, just the slightest gap between his lips. He has something more to say.

“If the dead pool,” Scott begins, regaining Derek’s focus and pulling his back straight, “really was made a banshee, then there’s something else that you should know about.”

Scott casts his gaze between Derek and Isaac, eyes flitting back and forth and back and forth. He’s fidgeting, hands dropped down to his sides, shoulders almost shrugging as his head shakes. He’s nervous, and that makes Isaac nervous too.

Scott’s gearing up for something big, and, in the final moment, his eyes land on Derek. “Your name broke the third list. It was a cipher key.”

Isaac’s heart leaps into his throat.

Derek’s head tips forward, chin tucking close to his chest. “And the other two keys were Allison and Aiden.”

“And I – I don’t want to make you nervous, but,” Scott’s words are pointed more towards Isaac than Derek, though they redirect as he continues, “it kind of feels like there might be a pattern there, doesn’t it? Allison, Aiden...” Scott makes eye contact. “You.”

“Names picked by a banshee,” Derek says, answering like they’re discussing the weather.

Isaac feels like he's going to be sick. His heart is working its way up his esophagus, ready to be spewed across the floor, swirl of feelings laid bare. Isaac has to swallow, has to fight not to retch.

"It... It could mean you're in danger," Scott stammers, needlessly sugarcoating.

"Scott," Derek says, and it's almost an admonishment. "Banshees don't predict danger."

Isaac wants to scream, wants to thrash and wail and cry. His heart is splintering and it's so painful he can barely breathe.

"They predict death."

—

Isaac feels entirely useless. Derek is losing his powers and has been predicted to die, Sheriff Stilinski is in the hospital, Stiles and Lydia are trying to crack the new code. So much is happening, and Isaac is just going to school.

Isaac is in a daze. He's gone numb around the edges. There's very little he *can* do. That's the only reason he's at school in the first place. If there was anything Isaac could do, he would be doing it. But, he's at a standstill. He's stuck. He's just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

On his way to the locker room, Scott joins him, pulling Isaac out of his reverie with a quiet, "Hey."

"Hey," Isaac repeats. He doesn't give Scott anything else to work with, just ambles alongside him in silence. There's nothing else Isaac *can* give him. He can't do anything. Even walking is difficult. His body feels heavy, like there are weights on his ankles, dragging him down and turning each step into a battle.

They travel down a large stretch of hallway without a word passed between them until Scott cracks. He stops walking altogether, coming to an unexpected pause.

Isaac manages a step and half before he notices, pivoting before his foot hits the ground, turning to face Scott. He forces his body forward, closing the gap between them as Scott watches him expectantly.

Isaac doesn't know what Scott wants from him, and can't find the words to ask. So, he raises his eyebrows in question, hoping for an

explanation.

"You're being quiet," Scott says. "Are you mad I didn't tell you about the cipher key?"

It's a logical conclusion. Isaac and Scott haven't seen each other since last night, when Scott broke the news. And, now, Isaac is being uncharacteristically quiet. (Well, uncharacteristic where Scott and the pack are involved.)

Still, it couldn't be further from the truth. Isaac says as much. "No. No, not at all. I get – I get why you didn't tell me. You didn't want to upset me with everything else going on, and, honestly, I appreciate it. It's just... Well, like you thought it would, it's kind of freaked me out. I feel like I should be doing something."

Scott seems to sag in relief. "As soon as there's something to do, we'll do it. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, Scott, I know," Isaac nods. Then, "Sorry I didn't tell you about Derek's powers."

Scott's eyebrows drop, pulling together. He gives a little tip of his head, "You – You really don't have to apologize for that."

"Oh. Good," Isaac says, smiling. "'Cause I was only being half sincere."

"Well, then I half accept your apology," Scott says, laughter coming out as a quiet exhale. He claps a hand on Isaac's backpack, "Okay, come on. We better get going or Coach will have our heads."

Isaac agrees, and they make their way towards the locker room, slipping inside just as Coach launches into his announcements.

"All right! Now, I know the start of the season bonfire, it's a big deal for you guys," Coach begins. (If Isaac's honest, he had completely forgotten about the bonfire.) "I also know it gets out of hand sometimes. The alumni show up, there's other teams, and alcohol. Lots and lots of alcohol."

The locker room erupts into applause. The only people not cheering are Isaac, Scott, and, maybe surprisingly, Liam. He's sitting with some of the other underclassmen, but his head is ducked low and he's studying his lacrosse stick with unwarranted concentration. Isaac spares a glance at Scott, seeing that he's also noticed Liam's strange manner.

“Shut up!” Coach barks. “Now, what I *don’t* understand is why anybody would ever want to get stumbling down drunk in front of a massive open fire.” Coach sighs, “I’m also resigned to not being able to stop you guys.”

The cheering starts up again, but Isaac is hardly paying attention to Coach anymore. He’s communicating wordlessly with Scott, trying to figure out if he knows what’s up with Liam. Scott only gives him a tiny shrug of ignorance.

“I’ll also remind you: your team captain, McCall, will be there,” Coach says, pulling Scott and Isaac’s focus. “And I can count on him to narc on any and every one of these little bastards.”

Isaac didn’t know Scott was going to the bonfire. Isaac had no intention or interest in going, but, now, he feels obligated to do so. Out of solidarity. Or something.

“Get back to class!” Coach yells.

As the team starts filtering out of the locker room, Isaac turns back to Scott, who says, voice pitched low, “Liam just ran out.”

Isaac’s expression shifts in confusion. “Should we go after him?”

“Yeah,” Scott says. “Yeah, let’s go.”

Isaac nods, and then he follows Scott out of the locker room and into the hallway. They easily find Liam sitting in a stairwell, still using his lacrosse stick to occupy his hands. Isaac and Scott pause. Isaac juts his chin out, gesturing for Scott to go ahead. Scott does, taking the first step down the stairs while Isaac hangs back at the top.

Liam startles when he hears someone coming, though he settles when he sees that it’s only Scott and Isaac.

Scott sits down a step above Liam, lightly touching his arm, “Hey... you okay?”

Liam stops fiddling with his stick, but he doesn’t respond and he keeps his eyes trained forward.

Scott repeats, voice staying level and soft, “Hey.”

Liam looks at Scott, allowing their eyes to meet for just a moment. He quickly looks away again, though not fully. He keeps Scott in the edge

of his vision, tapping his legs with his stick and saying, “Last night, my printer went off by itself. I couldn’t turn it off. I hit the cancel button, but it just kept printing.”

“Printing what?” Scott asks.

Liam reaches into his back pocket, pulling out a folded piece of paper and handing it to Scott. Isaac can’t see it, but he has a feeling he already knows what it is.

Just then, there’s a shout from down the hall. It’s Coach, yelling, “What the hell is this?”

Scott looks up at Isaac, then back to Liam, and, in an instant, they’re all following the noise. They rush down towards Coach’s office, stopping just outside the door. The printer is whirring, identical pages filling the office and overflowing into the hall.

Scott snags a copy from the floor. He holds the two sheets in his hand, one from Liam’s printer and one from Coach’s.

“See the difference?” Liam asks.

Isaac peeks over Scott’s shoulder, trailing his eyes down the dead pool. There’s a shocking absence.

“Derek’s not on the list anymore,” Scott says.

Liam is speaking, but Isaac doesn’t hear him. Derek’s not on the list.

This time, Isaac actually does gag. His hand flies up to cover his mouth, shoulders turning inward. There’s saliva flooding his mouth and his eyes are watering and he feels like coughing. He heaves, dry and rough and sending the tears streaming down his cheeks.

Then, a hand is on his back, stroking firm and steady between his shoulder blades. Isaac doesn’t have to look to know who it is.

“You’re okay, Isaac,” Scott says. “Just breathe.”

Isaac gasps in a breath, hadn’t realized he’d been holding it in the first place. Isaac’s heart is racing and his skin is turning damp with sweat, but the contents of his stomach stay firmly in place. He swallows anyway, clearing his throat too, trying to keep his heart where it belongs.

“Call him,” Scott says, hand still circling slow and easy. “Let’s call

Derek, okay?"

Isaac sort of feels like he's going to pass out, but he listens anyway. He pulls his phone out of his pocket, dialing Derek's number with clammy palms and trembling fingers. As the line rings, Isaac bites hard on his lip, not quite enough to draw blood, but enough to hurt. The small sting of pain and the hand on his back keep Isaac from losing all control, though it's not by much.

"Hey, Isaac. Everything okay?" Derek answers.

Derek answers, and Isaac's heart drops back into his chest and his lip pulls free of his teeth. He wipes his wet face, sniffing a relieved, "Derek."

"Yeah? Isaac, what's going on?" Derek asks.

Isaac doesn't respond, not yet. Instead, he asks, "Are you completely safe?"

"Yes, Isaac. What are you—"

"The dead pool's been updated and you're not on it," Isaac says, interrupting Derek's impatient questions.

"Oh," Derek says intelligently. Then, *"Well, that's no reason to completely panic. I am losing my powers. Maybe The Benefactor knows that."*

"Or maybe The Benefactor knows that you're going to *die* since The Benefactor is a *banshee*," Isaac hisses. Scott's hand slides up to the place where neck meets shoulder. He doesn't squeeze or pat or move at all, only brings a constant, comforting weight.

Derek sighs, *"Maybe. Look, Isaac, I'm being very careful. I'm with Braeden right now, we're armed. It's going to be okay."*

"Is it?" Isaac asks, hating the way his voice goes weak.

"Do you trust me?" Derek asks.

"That's not fair," Isaac answers.

"Do you trust me?" Derek repeats.

"Yes. You know I do," Isaac says. He trusts Derek with everything he has, but that doesn't mean he trusts the circumstances they're under.

“Then have a little faith, okay?” Derek says.

“Okay,” Isaac says, voice barely a whisper.

“Go back to class. I’ll see you later,” Derek says.

Isaac doesn’t say anything else. He’s too conscious of the danger fast approaching, he’s too conscious of his words and the idea of goodbye. So, Isaac doesn’t say anything. He just hangs up and pockets his phone.

Scott and Liam are watching Isaac. Scott is shrouded in sympathy and understanding while Liam looks a little confused and a lot uncomfortable.

“He’s fine,” Isaac says. Then, a little despairingly, “For now.”

“We’ll keep it that way, Isaac. I promise,” Scott says. His hand does move now, curling his fingers and pressing down like he’s trying to embed Isaac with his word.

“You can’t promise that,” Isaac says, shaking his head.

Scott drops his hand and says, “I’m doing it anyway.”

It’s enough for Isaac to smile.

—

Isaac and Scott arrive at the bonfire, neither super pumped, but in it together.

“You know you didn’t have to come to this,” Scott says, talking a little more loudly than usual, out of instinct more than necessity. “If you want to bail and go stick with Derek, I’ll understand.”

“Derek specifically told me that I had to stop hovering and I wasn’t allowed back in the loft for at least an hour,” Isaac says. “So.”

It makes Scott laugh, just a little. Then, “He’s really not worried?”

Isaac shakes his head, “No.”

Isaac doesn’t really want to talk about Derek right now. Isaac has chosen to give Derek all his trust, handing over his heart and believing he’ll survive the night. It’s a scary thing, but Isaac really does have faith in Derek. Or, at the very least, he has faith in Braeden’s ability to

save Derek's ass while Isaac is preoccupied.

Isaac doesn't want to talk about Derek, doesn't want to reignite that anxiety. Instead, he stays with Scott along the outskirts of the bonfire, commiserating together.

"Well, I appreciate you coming with me. I know this isn't your scene," Scott says.

Isaac laughs, "Yeah, 'cause you look you're having the time of your life right now."

Scott smiles, "Okay, yeah, it's definitely not my thing either, but I'm required to be here."

"Then so am I," Isaac shrugs. He really doesn't mind. Sure, the music is way too loud, the smoke is already clouding his lungs, and the mass of bodies makes Isaac sweat, but he doesn't mind. He's here by choice, even if the comment about Derek made it appear otherwise.

Scott keeps smiling. He's surveying the crowd when he asks, "Were we supposed to wear our jerseys?"

Isaac looks around, seeing all of the other lacrosse players with theirs on. He huffs a laugh, "Hah, yeah, I guess."

Then, Isaac spots a familiar figure, but, with the haze of fire and the blinking of lights, he can't be certain it's her. Still, he asks, "Is that Malia?"

Isaac points across the way, bringing Scott's attention towards the flashes of brown hair and the glint of a flask in her hand. Scott nods, "Um. Yeah, I think so? Wanna go say hi?"

Isaac shrugs again, "Sure."

And so, Isaac and Scott maneuver through the raucous partygoers, joining Malia under the branches of a tree.

"Hey!" Scott calls, smile heard in his voice. Malia spins, and, as they fall into her sight, her own smile falls away. Scott hardly notices, lit up with enthusiasm, "What are you doing here?"

"Getting drunk!" Malia says, lifting her flask. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to make sure no one gets hurt," Scott answers, typically.

“That sounds fun too,” Malia says, barely meeting Scott’s eyes.

This isn’t going very well. Malia is clearly still angry. Stiles told Isaac that Malia had come by after the plan at the hospital. He said she had already talked to Peter and described her feelings as conflicted.

The Malia in front of Isaac doesn’t seem conflicted. She seems pissed off and determined not to let them rain on her parade.

“I don’t want to ruin your night or anything,” Scott says, a little too accurately, “but we kind of can’t get drunk.”

“What?” Malia asks, still dancing, but face twisting in skepticism.

“I think it has something to do with our healing,” Scott says. “But, trust me, I’ve tried. You’re not going to feel anything.”

Huh. Scott doesn’t strike Isaac as the type to drink underage, but he’s also had a lifetime of pain to want to numb and forget. Isaac can’t judge him for that.

“Maybe you should tell *him* that,” Malia says, shifting her attention. Isaac and Scott follow her gaze, easily noticing Liam. He’s sitting on a bench, a liter of Coke in one hand and a brown paper wrapped bottle in the other.

Malia turns back around, watching them with an indiscernible look. Her eyes meet Isaac’s for just a moment, then she pivots and rejoins the party.

“Will you keep an eye on him?” Scott asks, eyes darting between Isaac and Malia.

Isaac nods, “Yeah, go after her.”

Scott does, following Malia a little further into the crowd while Isaac makes his way over to Liam. He’s with one of his friends – Mason, Isaac thinks his name is – meaning Isaac can’t actually tell Liam about the unfortunate reality of werewolf healing, but he shouldn’t have to. He’ll just monitor.

“Hey,” Isaac says as he approaches.

Liam looks about as happy to see him as Malia had.

“I’m fine,” Liam says at once, a little bit of a growl slipping into his voice.

“That’s great, then you won’t mind if I join you,” Isaac says, taking a seat on the bench next to Liam’s friend. He asks, “It’s Mason, right?”

The boy nods, eyes narrowing in confusion, “Yeah...”

“I’m Isaac. I’m on the team with Liam. You can’t tell ‘cause I forgot my jersey, but, yeah.” Isaac is so awkward and so bad at small talk, but he’s trying his best.

Mason nods, “Right.”

Then, Liam stumbles. Isaac darts to his feet, grabbing Liam a little more roughly than intended in the rush to steady him.

“Hey, Liam, you okay?” Isaac asks, concern flooding his voice.

“I’m getting drunk,” Liam bites out, but it comes out slurred. It’s not just that. His eyes are glassy and he’s swaying on his feet, off kilter and out of balance. He’s actually drunk.

Isaac searches through the throng, quickly spotting Scott and Malia. Scott is similarly supporting Malia, and, when his eyes meet Isaac’s, they’re lit with more than just the reflection of flame. It’s fear.

There’s something wrong.

—

Isaac and Scott get Liam and Malia over to the bench, watching as clarity drains out of them. They appear drunk in a way that shouldn’t be possible. It’s more than a little worrying.

“How much has he had to drink?” Isaac asks Mason, who still hasn’t left Liam’s side. He’s a good friend.

“Not enough to get him like this,” Mason shouts over the music.

“Something’s happening. We need to get them out of here,” Scott says. “I think we’re gonna have to... um...”

Isaac can’t tell if Scott has actually stopped talking or if his words have been drowned out by the ringing in his ears. It’s piercing and sharp, making Isaac wince. The movement brings a flurry of color past Isaac’s eyes and he winces harder at the overwhelming blaze of sight and sound.

There’s a hand on his elbow. It’s Mason. His voice cuts through the

ringing, “How much did you guys drink?”

“Nothing,” Scott says, coming out a little clearer than before. “Not even a sip.”

“Me neither,” Isaac says, trying to blink away the blur that’s invading his peripherals. Isaac is leaning a little into Mason’s hand. He doesn’t mean to, doesn’t even realize he’s doing it at first. Not until Mason’s other hand comes up, keeping Isaac from falling backwards.

“Sorry,” Isaac mumbles, resting against the picnic table bench instead.

“It’s not the drinks,” Scott’s voice says from Isaac’s left. “It’s the music.”

Isaac looks up at him. Scott’s hand grips Isaac’s bicep, helping Isaac back to center, both in balance and in focus.

“We have to... We have to turn off the music,” Scott says to Isaac. He’s blinking long and slow. Next, to Mason, he says, “Don’t let them out of your sight.”

Through the haze, Isaac can see Mason nod.

Then, Scott and Isaac start fighting their way through the crowd. The ground is spinning under Isaac’s feet and the harsh buzzing in his ears is growing louder, but he perseveres. He grabs Scott’s arm to keep from being separated, and follows him into the smoke.

Isaac and Scott are in a better state than Malia and Liam – likely because their healing is only battling the music and not the alcohol too – but they’re still struggling. Isaac is stumbling, eyesight so smeared he wouldn’t know if he was going in the right direction if it weren’t for Scott. The closer they get to the speakers, the louder the music rises and the harder it becomes to brush off the noise, but, still, they try.

Isaac and Scott are almost there. The DJ comes into view. He’s duplicated across Isaac’s irises, but he’s there nonetheless. Isaac thinks they’re actually going to make it, but then, the DJ turns up the volume.

The sound waves hit Isaac and Scott like an actual current of water. It knocks them back, driving them down as the frequency pulls coherency right out from under them.

Isaac tries to push himself to his feet, tries to get back up, but then strong arms are lifting him. Isaac is too weak to break free. Isaac can't do anything as he's dragged alongside Scott, pulled into the high school without a single notice from the crowd pulsing around them.

Isaac and Scott are thrown to the ground, right next to the unconscious forms of Liam and Malia. It's all Isaac can do not to join them in the darkness. Isaac forces himself to stay awake, watching as a man stands before them, towering above with a menacing smirk.

"What is that?" Scott asks. "What are you doing?"

"It's gasoline," the man says, stepping closer. "Haigh says we gotta burn you."

Inside the school, the music is muffled, allowing Isaac enough clarity of thought to know what's about to happen. It's an assassination attempt, but he doesn't have the strength to stop it.

A bottle cap clatters to the ground, and then there's gasoline pouring over Isaac's skin.

They're about to be burnt alive.

The gasoline drips over Isaac's face and arms, seeping into his clothes and coating him completely.

They're about to die.

Isaac is lying on the floor of the high school, and he's about to die. Scott is at his side, breathing heavily and staring down the assailant, but there's nothing they can do. As long as the music keeps blaring, they'll be too tired to fight and too weak to survive. Isaac is entirely useless. There's nothing he can do.

The man holds up a lighter.

Isaac thinks of Derek. He thinks of how, tonight, Derek was supposed to be the one at risk. He thinks of the fire that killed his family. He thinks that this, this cruel irony, is going to destroy him. Isaac thinks of Derek, and closes his eyes.

The music stops.

The ringing in Isaac's ears goes quiet, and, when he opens his eyes, his vision is clear. They open just in time to see Scott grabbing the

assassin's wrist and closing the cap of the lighter over the flame. Scott's glowing red eyes replace the glowing red flame as he squeezes hard, twisting the man's arm until his bones grind together and he groans in anguish.

Then, a door bursts open. Derek and Braeden run in.

Isaac's eyes are glued to Derek as he takes on two of the other security guard assassins. It's an uneven match, two against one in hand to hand combat, but it doesn't matter. The guards don't have a chance against Derek. Derek doesn't have super-strength or super-speed, doesn't have claws or fangs, but he fights like he still does. He fights like there's a current of power rippling under his skin. He fights hard, taking down the attackers with efficient ease.

I guess Derek can win a fight every once in a while.

The lead guard, still struck down from Scott's attack, reaches for the discarded lighter. Braeden doesn't hesitate in taking him out. She slams her knee against his jaw, causing his neck to crack, body hitting the floor with a thud and fingers only ghosting the lighter.

Then, struggling up from the ground, Scott asks, "What happened to the gun?"

"You're covered in gasoline," Derek says, like he can't believe Scott has made it this far with a question so stupid.

"Oh, yeah," Scott whispers.

Derek stops in front of Isaac. He holds out a hand, and Isaac takes it. He lets Derek pull him to his feet. There's a moment where Isaac and Derek just stare at each other, locked in heavy eye contact. Derek breaks the moment, but not the gaze, and says, "See, I'm not always the one whose ass needs saving."

—

When Isaac returns from his impromptu shower in the locker room, gasoline scrubbed from his hair and skin, he finds the group still huddled in the hallway. The tension is thick in the air, even more so than when Isaac left.

That can't be good.

"What's going on?" Isaac asks, moving closer.

The group turns his way. They're wearing expressions marked in varying degrees of worry, concern, and panic. Isaac looks from Derek to Scott. "Guys?"

"Uh. Lydia and Stiles were at Eichen House pulling on the next thread. They're both fine, Parrish got there in time, but Brunski tried to – he tried to kill them. Lydia's at the station and Stiles is at the hospital with a concussion, but." Scott takes a deep breath. "It's Meredith. She's The Benefactor."

Chapter End Notes

Isaac and Stiles could've been watching *Gnomeo and Juliet* but Mo (best friend) suggested *Thor* instead.

Monstrous

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 4 episode 10

Word count: 6,624

It's a strange time of night. Between midnight and sunrise when, in a seemingly mundane town like Beacon Hills, the parties have ended and the streets have gone still. Even the bustling hospital has turned hushed and quiet.

Melissa escorts Isaac through the building. She asks, "How've you been, Isaac? How's the loft?"

Isaac can't suppress his smile. The joy bubbles up inside him, splitting his face in a radiant grin. "It's great," he says. "I mean, apart from the assassins."

"Good," Melissa says, flashing Isaac a quick smile of her own. "We'll have to meet outside of the hospital and catch up sometime. I'd love to hear more about it."

"You – You would?" Isaac asks. His surprise is palpable, and he's a little embarrassed by it.

Melissa stops walking. Isaac stumbles to an unsteady pause beside her. She looks at him with a smile gone soft and kind eyes, "Of course. When you moved out, I said we'd always have your back. I didn't just mean in disasters, I mean the little stuff too, the good stuff. You're one of my son's closest friends and just an all around wonderful person. I'm always going to be looking out for you."

Isaac blinks, eyes going damp. "I–"

"We'll talk about it when all this is over, okay?" Melissa says, leveling Isaac with a look of patience and understanding. "For now, I think Stiles would like to see you."

Isaac nods, and they keep walking. Melissa leads Isaac around one last corner, bringing him to a stop outside a closed door. She says, "You can go in. Let me know if you need anything."

"Okay," Isaac says. Then, "Thank you, Melissa."

She smiles again and leaves Isaac to it.

Slowly, Isaac opens the door to the hospital room. Stiles is sitting on the edge of the bed, shoulders hunched and looking so... normal. He definitely doesn't look like he just survived an attempted murder, but, of course, Stiles wouldn't. He'd take it in stride, holding himself together for everyone else while crumbling inside.

Stiles looks up. His eyes are wide, but it's not out of fear and it only lasts a few seconds before they narrow, a little accusatory. "What are *you* doing here? Where's Scott?"

Isaac doesn't take offense, just steps further into the room and closes the door behind him, saying, "He's dealing with another assassin. So, he sent the next best thing."

"You're not even the *third* best thing. The *next* best thing would have been..." Stiles' snark dies in his throat, trailing off. He fumbles, "Would have been..."

"Go on, finish that sentence, I dare you," Isaac goads just because he can. Because if he lets this go, if he handles Stiles with too much care, he'll shatter all the same.

"The next best thing would have been Derek," Stiles says, refusing to cave, but having nothing better to say. (Lydia is at the sheriff's station with Meredith, Kira is still with her mom at the hospital in Beacon County, and Malia and Stiles are still on the outs.)

Isaac laughs, "Okay, yeah, you're definitely concussed."

Stiles glares at him. "Seriously, though. Have I not made it clear how I feel about you and I in this hospital?"

"Oh, so you want me to leave? Wanna sit here by yourself?" Isaac asks. It's maybe a little unfair to make Stiles say it, but they both almost died tonight and Isaac is tired.

Stiles huffs. "Fine. You can stay."

"Great," Isaac says with a half-fake smile. He falls into the chair across from Stiles. It's hard and uncomfortable, but Isaac doesn't care. He's not going anywhere if he doesn't have to. "Melissa said you have to get a CT scan."

Stiles shrugs, "Yeah. I've had one before."

Because of the nogitsune. Stiles' eyes go dark and haunted, and Isaac really regrets bringing it up.

Stiles recovers quickly, blank stare replacing the whirl of shadows. He clears his throat and asks, "Did you go to the bonfire?"

Isaac quickly realizes Stiles doesn't know what happened. No one told him, but maybe it's because no one really knows. Melissa probably doesn't, if her calm exterior was anything to go by. Regardless, Stiles is just trying to change the subject, just trying to make conversation, and Isaac has to drop a bomb on him.

"Um. Yeah," Isaac says, looking down at his hands, fingers twiddling. He can't *not* tell Stiles. He'll find out eventually and then he'll only feel betrayed and less trusted than he already does. But, still, that doesn't mean Isaac *wants* to tell him.

"Isaac," Stiles says, stretching it out like a warning.

Isaac sighs, running a hand through his still shower damp hair, and says, "Scott, Malia, Liam, and I almost got burned alive."

"Malia? Is she okay?" Stiles asks. His shoulders roll back, going stiff and straight as the dullness of his eyes fades entirely, replaced by frantic energy.

"Yeah, we're *all* fine, thanks for the concern," Isaac grumbles.

Stiles scoffs, "Well, I know *you're* fine, you're sitting right in front of me!"

Isaac glares, but it doesn't reach his voice when he says, "Malia's totally safe. She went home, I think."

"Good," Stiles says, softening a little.

Isaac wants to ask about Malia, but he doesn't think it's the right time. Beside, before he can, Stiles speaks again, asking, "So... *everyone* almost died tonight?"

Isaac exhales a small breath of laughter, "Yeah, pretty much. Luckily, Derek and Braeden showed up to save us."

"It's just never going to end, is it?" Stiles asks. His voice dips into something somber.

Isaac frowns. He doesn't know what to say to that. Because, truthfully,

as long as they're in Beacon Hills, Isaac's not sure the chaos will ever cease. But he doesn't want to say that. Not to Stiles, not when he already appears so hopeless.

But he doesn't want to lie to him either. So, Isaac just says, "I don't know."

Stiles locks eyes with Isaac. They meet in recognition, in understanding. Stiles looks at him, and Isaac knows Stiles sees right through him. He knows he can't hide anything from Stiles, knows he sees the true meaning in his words. Stiles knows what Isaac's really thinking because he's thinking it too.

It's never going to stop. Not unless they do something.

Isaac sits with Stiles until the wee hours of the morning. They don't discuss the weight of their uncertainty, they don't comment on Meredith, and they don't recount their traumatic evenings. Instead, they discuss human things like homework, they comment on the new movies they're most excited to see, and they recount some of their favorite childhood memories.

(Though, Isaac has a feeling they weren't being entirely honest about that last one. The memories were easy things like school field trips or games played at recess. They were shared experiences, surface level moments. There was no mention of family, no mention of Stiles' mom or Isaac's brother.)

Isaac sits with Stiles until his phone rings. He checks the caller ID and answers right away, "Hey, Scott, everything okay?"

"For the moment," Scott says. He sounds tired and worn down. *"I took the surviving members of Satomi's pack to the animal clinic, but I don't think we can stay here. I've got an idea of where we can hide, but I'm gonna need some help protecting them."*

"Where are you thinking?" Isaac asks.

"Argent's warehouse. It's a big space and it's on the edge of town," Scott explains.

"That could work," Isaac agrees. With such high stakes and such limited time, it's going to *have* to work.

“So, can you meet me there?” Scott asks.

Isaac hesitates. He looks at Stiles. Isaac doesn’t want to leave him here alone. Stiles meets his gaze. He gives a small nod that means, *I’m fine, just go.*

Isaac doesn’t believe him.

“Isaac?”

“Yeah, I’ll meet you there,” Isaac spills, feeling a little forced and a little trapped.

Scott gives him the address, and Isaac hangs up. He’s still looking at Stiles, and Stiles is still looking at him. Isaac is searching for cracks in Stiles’ resolve, looking for signs of struggle or distress. He’s looking for a reason to stay.

Isaac doesn’t know what Stiles is searching for, but he must find it. He says the words aloud, “I’m fine, you can go.” Then, “Melissa told me to sleep anyway.”

“It’s Satomi’s pack,” Isaac says in lieu of a proper response.

Stiles shrugs, “It doesn’t matter who it is. It matters that Scott’s there.”

Stiles doesn’t have to say anything else. Isaac already knows. Scott would lay down his life before he let anyone else die, and they can’t let that happen. Stiles and Isaac... they need Scott. Scott balances them out. They can’t get through this without him.

“I won’t let him get himself killed,” Isaac says.

Stiles nods, “I know you won’t.”

—

Isaac makes it to the warehouse just as day breaks over the horizon. He meets Scott at the entrance, but they don’t talk until they’re all the way inside. Scott leads him through to the back of the building where they step through a doorway, closed off not by an actual door, but by plastic sheets. There, Isaac gets his first view of Satomi and the surviving members of her pack. There are eight of them. They’re rough around the edges, tiredness in their eyes and blood smeared on their skin, but they’re alive.

There are more survivors than Isaac was expecting and not all of them

are strangers. Brett is among them, standing with a shorter blond girl, and, when Isaac enters, Brett gives him a nod. It's part greeting and part approval.

"This is Isaac," Scott says, speaking mostly to an older Asian woman who Isaac knows to be the alpha. "He's here to help."

"I hope I'm not the only help you called," Isaac says.

"You're not," Scott says, but it's overshadowed when Satomi speaks.

"You're the one Derek spoke of," she says. There's nothing telling in her words, no double meaning or feeling imbued, but her tone carries a certain significance. It's practiced. Calculated, almost, but not in a bad way. It's a show of the wisdom she's accumulated, the sort of all-knowing nature you would expect from someone of her age and experience.

"Oh," Isaac says, caught off guard and conflicted. On one hand, Isaac feels a small swell of resentment towards Satomi. Though, whether that's his genuine impression or one borrowed from Stiles, Isaac isn't sure. But, on the other hand, "Your tea saved our lives. So, thank you."

Satomi smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes. "Don't thank me yet."

It's not a threat, merely a reference to their dire situation and the harm that might come to Isaac in their attempt to protect her pack. Still, it sends a chill down his spine.

No one says anything after that.

Isaac looks to Scott, unsure what to do next. Scott answers the silent question with a silent answer, gesturing for Isaac to follow him. Isaac does.

Scott leads Isaac past the pack, through another empty doorway, and into the adjacent room. Here, they have some privacy, though it's not much. There's only a hanging sheet and a thin wall between them and the pack, but it's good. It gives them space without being entirely disconnected.

As they walk from one room to the next, Isaac notices someone is missing. Once on the other side of the plastic barrier, Isaac asks, "Is Liam not with you?"

It's a casual question, a genuine curiosity, but it makes Scott stutter and pause. "No, I—" he hesitates, "He's scared, I think. I took him home."

"He has a lot of reason to be scared," Isaac says. It's not meant to state the obvious, but rather, "He's so young and so new to this. If we can stop the dead pool and give him a chance to adjust and learn, then he'll be okay."

Scott frowns. "Maybe."

"Scott," Isaac says, a little more forcefully than he would ever usually speak, "he's going to be okay."

"How do you know?" Scott asks. There's vulnerability in the askance.

"Because he has you," Isaac says, simple as anything.

Scott smiles. It's a slight thing, just a twitch of his lips and a glint in his eyes, but Isaac sees it. Then, Scott asks, "How's Stiles?"

Isaac shrugs, "About as okay as the rest of us."

Scott nods. The conversation lulls.

Isaac thinks about Stiles. He's all by himself in that room, wearing the same clothes he was almost murdered in with no access to support or comfort or information. Isaac hates it. Isaac hates the thought of Stiles alone in *that* hospital, waiting for a CT scan and purposely fighting off sleep. It's eerily familiar, and Isaac hates it.

Unlike most of his decisions, Isaac doesn't overthink it. He just sends the text: **I had to leave Stiles alone at the hospital. I know you kind of hate him right now, but you should go see him.**

Isaac doesn't offer his own opinion on the controversy, doesn't say *he needs you*. He only hopes that the implication and the neutrality is enough.

I don't hate him, Malia texts back.

Isaac doesn't get a chance to reply before a rumbling growl meets his ears. It's deep and intimidating. For a split second, Isaac and Scott lock eyes, then they run. They push aside the plastic sheet, maneuver around the lingering pack members, and burst out into the warehouse's open space.

Blocked by a tangle of wires a few feet away, Brett stands before Argent, facing down his gun with snarling teeth.

“Wait! Wait!” Scott calls out.

There’s barely an inch between the pair. If Brett lunges, they won’t be able to stop him and Argent *will* shoot.

“Brett!” Scott shouts, louder still. His voice is stern and authoritative, “This is *his* place. It’s *his*.”

Predictably, Brett falls back under Scott’s instruction. He puts his fangs away, though his jaw stays clenched. He stares at Scott with a glimmer of defiance in his eyes, but he walks away. He turns his back on Argent’s still raised gun, an open act of arrogance, and rejoins his packmates.

“Scott,” Argent says, stepping forward. He drops his gun to his side, but doesn’t put it away yet. “If you’re bringing guests, you could have called.”

Argent’s focus drifts to the room next door, taking in the sight of the worn down and frightened pack.

“I – I didn’t have anywhere else to take them,” Scott says.

Argent casts his eyes down, intensity building, like maybe he’s thinking. Then, his eyes flick up again. He makes contact with Scott. Argent studies him, eyes heavy and trained like a hunter. Scott doesn’t waver.

The moment is broken when Satomi approaches. “I know this man,” she says. Argent looks at her, chin inclining just so. “He may not remember, but we’ve met before.”

“You can trust him,” Scott says. “*I* trust him.”

Scott says it so easily, so confidently. He hands Argent that power without a blink of doubt. Isaac knows Argent is safe, knows he’s dependable and certain, knows Scott’s stamp of approval comes from a long stretch of rehabilitation and inarguable proof. But Satomi doesn’t know that, and the words don’t sway her, not fully. “How do we know he’s not like the others?”

“What others?” Argent asks.

“Last night,” Scott says, “there was a whole team after them.”

Brett steps closer with caution. He flits his eye to Scott, like he’s trying to convey that he’s harmless. He holds something out to Argent, saying, “And they used crossbows.”

Argent accepts the offering from Brett. It’s a splintered arrow, topped with a familiar flash of metal. It’s silver in color, but not substance – if the metallic scent is anything to go by.

Unnecessary as it is, Isaac can’t help but ask, “They’re hunters, aren’t they?”

“Not if they’re killing for profit,” Argent says. Intensity not just in his eyes, but in his voice now too. It’s almost anger. “Not anymore.”

“Can they find us?” Brett asks.

“They might already know you’re here,” Argent says. “Maybe they’re waiting for dark.”

“So we’re not safe here?” Scott says. It’s barely a question. It’s an expression of confirmation, of suspicions turned to certainty.

“We’re not safe *anywhere*,” Satomi says. It’s a bleak but expected truth. “We’ve been trying to get out for days. Everywhere we turn, we find someone new trying to kill us.”

“If they’re coming, Scott,” Argent moves in close, “then they’re coming for you too. You’re still number one on the dead pool.”

“I know,” Scott says, earnest. “I know Lydia can get the answer from Meredith. She just needs more time.”

“Well, then, that’s what she’ll get,” Argent says. He wasn’t called to help, he wasn’t asked, but he’s here now. He’s stumbled into the middle of things, and he’s not leaving. He’s not going anywhere. He’s following the code.

Nous protégeons ceux qui ne peuvent pas se protéger eux même.

—

Darkness hasn’t fallen yet. The sun is still high in the sky. So, they wait. And, while they do, Isaac checks his phone. He doesn’t have any new messages from Malia, but there is one from Stiles: **Did you tell Malia to come check on me?**

Isaac texts back: **Um... maybe.**

When his phone buzzes, Isaac is expecting a quip about invasion of privacy or meddling with his personal life. He's expecting frustration or annoyance. Instead, the message reads, simply: **Thank you.**

Isaac's face splits into a small grin, one that twists and squirms like he's trying to hold back the extent of his satisfaction. He types out: **You're welcome.**

"What are you smiling at?" Scott asks.

A little startled, Isaac's eyes dart from side to side. There are others nearby, but they're just milling about, passing the time in casual conversation. None are paying Scott any attention and none are smiling either. Only once he's certain Scott is talking to him does Isaac look up, allowing their eyes to greet each other.

"Uh," Isaac pockets his phone, "I think Malia just forgave Stiles."

Scott's eyes light up, "Are you serious?"

Isaac's smile returns, this time a little brighter. Scott's enthusiasm is contagious. "Yeah, I – I don't know for sure, but she just went to see him at the hospital."

"That's awesome," Scott says.

Even while they're waiting for battle, Scott's joy is genuine. Even now, his friends are the center of his happiness.

But, honestly, Isaac gets it. Stiles and Malia were so good together, so good *for* each other. Isaac doesn't know Malia well, but he knows how she made Stiles feel. He came alive around her. She pulled him back up to the surface.

So, Isaac feels it too. There's a relief and a victory in the knowledge that they're not quite done yet. They're not quite ready to call it quits. There's still hope. They're still trying.

—

When the rest of the cavalry arrives, the sky is a swirl of colors. Shades of bright tangerine, soft peach, and faded blue paint the world above. It's too beautiful for what's to come, a jarring juxtaposition against the troops marching in.

Derek and Braeden join the ranks with guns in hand and determination in their eyes. There's nothing soft about them.

The once static energy in the warehouse turns active and frenzied as the preparations begin. Argent arms the alarms and the weapons are loaded with ammunition. Derek observes the pack. They're a ragtag group, varied in size and strength and showing signs of fatigue.

"They'll be okay," Scott says, approaching Derek.

Derek looks between Scott and the pack, keeping his expression intentionally blank. He walks up to Scott, brushing by him as he says, "They've got claws and fangs, but they're not fighters."

"That's why I called you," Scott says, trailing after him.

"Well, try to remember I don't have claws and fangs anymore either," Derek says, only a little self-deprecating.

He comes to a stop next to Braeden. She cocks her gun. "That's why he called me."

"So, we're not even gonna pretend this is a false alarm?" Isaac questions. "I mean, it's *possible* nothing will happen."

In impressive synchronization, the group rounds on Isaac. Braeden's expression is the most neutral, falling into deadpan impatience. Derek's is more animated, shifting in bemusement. And Scott's face is pure shock, eyes bulging and lips a humorless upturn.

"What? I can't be the voice of positivity for once?" Isaac asks, glancing around at the three of them.

Derek meets Isaac head on. He raises his eyebrows, pulling together just so in a look that clearly says, *really*?

Isaac sighs. "Yeah, no, I heard it," he nods. "This is gonna be a complete disaster."

"Glad we're on the same page," Braeden says, just barely indulging before she directs her focus, asking, "Scott, you heard anything from Stiles or Lydia yet?"

"Lydia's still talking to Meredith. Stiles and Malia are going to the lake house," Scott says. "They've got a lead and they're trying to stop it."

"What if there is no stopping it?" Brett's voice brings the conversation

out of the circle of privacy and into the public. He stands between the two groups, between Scott and Satomi. He continues, “What if it doesn’t stop until we’re all dead?”

That’s the fear, isn’t it? If Lydia can’t get through to Meredith, if there’s no way to shut down the dead pool, then what? As long as the money is being distributed, the assassins will never stop coming. They’ll never be safe.

So. Do they run? Or do they stay and fight?

There’s a silence over the warehouse, weighing on their spirits, wet and heavy. It drips down their skin and into their pores, filling them with the kind of fear that could stop an army in their tracks.

“Then let’s send a message,” Derek says. “Let’s make tonight perfectly clear to anyone with a copy of that list.”

The room collectively turns, watching Derek with rapt attention as the conviction builds inside him.

“It doesn’t matter if they’re professional assassins, hunters, or an amateur who just picked up a gun,” Derek lifts his own. “*Anyone* who thinks they can hunt and kill us for money is gonna be put on another list. *Our* list.” His chest heaves. “They get to be a name on our dead pool.”

Isaac has told Derek to run before. When the full moon was rising and Kali was on her way, Isaac told Derek to run. Isaac told Derek that if he wanted to fight and die for something, he should do it for something meaningful.

But Isaac had been wrong. Derek had turned the car around. He turned, he looked Jennifer in the eye, and he defied her. In his bravery, he saved countless lives that night. And that will always be worth it. That will always be meaningful.

It’s taken Isaac and Derek a lot of growth and a lot of hardship to get here. It’s taken them a long time to land in a place where they understand their power and the good it can do, a place where Derek can stand up and lead with grace.

It’s taken them a long time to get here, but, now that they’ve arrived, they can’t go back.

The sun dips under the horizon. The warehouse descends into the shadows, lit up only by the bright lights of the city, tinting the room an unnatural green.

Isaac sits along a wall, knees tucked into his chest and head tipped back. Derek joins him, sliding down at his side. "Doing okay?"

"Tired of waiting," Isaac says, monotone and flat.

Derek hums, then asks, "When was the last time you slept?"

"Night before the bonfire," Isaac mumbles.

"Isaac," Derek complains, disapproving and concerned.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. There just hasn't been time. The adrenaline was keeping me up, but the longer we wait..." Isaac trails off, not finishing the sentence, but getting his point across well enough.

"You need to find some spark of energy, okay? Whatever it takes to wake up, *do it*," Derek says. "Being distracted is the worst thing you can be for a fight."

A slow smile tugs at the corner of Isaac's mouth, "Yeah, you taught me that already. Somewhere between Erica kissing you and the broken arm."

"Are you ever going to stop bringing that up?" Derek groans.

"Nope," Isaac says plainly. "It's fun tormenting you."

Derek turns to look at Isaac. Isaac looks back, head still leaning against the wall and meeting Derek's eyes through his lashes.

Derek flicks Isaac in the forehead.

Isaac's jaw drops open in surprise, reflexively reaching up to cover his forehead. He makes a disgruntled kind of noise, followed by, "And the abuse continues."

Derek rolls his eyes, already moving to stand. He looks down at Isaac, "Get your ass up and get ready to fight."

Derek extends a hand, and Isaac takes it.

Isaac stares out the window, thinking about what Derek said. Isaac needs to wake up. He needs motivation. He needs a spark.

He thinks of those days in the train car. He thinks of learning to fight with Erica, tussling even after Derek had left on another mysterious mission. Isaac thinks of how Erica's eyes would burn with happiness each time she made contact. He thinks of how her smile consumed her features, biting with harsh comments and overconfidence.

He wonders about Erica, wonders what she would say if she could see him now. Isaac and Erica were friends before the bite, before the power. Isaac watched the gift transform her, watched her turn vivid and scathing and strong. Erica took to power like it was made for her. She was made to burn bright.

Erica never did see him come into his power. She watched Isaac stumble and shrink. She watched Isaac wear leather jackets and costume himself as a timid version of Derek. She watched Isaac model himself after the only forms of power he had ever witnessed. She watched him turn cruel and mean and always scared. Isaac took to power like everything else in his life, slowly and awkwardly. Isaac wasn't made for power, but he's begun to embrace it.

Now, Isaac has witnessed gentle power. Isaac has seen that power can be good and kind and brave.

Isaac wonders if Erica would be proud of how he yields his bite. He wonders if she would be proud of who he's become. He wonders if she would even recognize him.

He thinks of Boyd. He thinks of Boyd sitting on the sidelines, watching him and Erica wrestle. He thinks of how Boyd would smile when Erica wasn't looking, something subdued like he was trying to hide it. Isaac thinks of how joy looked so effortless in Boyd's features, like it belonged in his eyes and his cheeks.

He wonders about Boyd, wonders about what could have been. Isaac and Boyd were never really friends, never close like they were with Erica. They were too shy, too reserved, too late. Without Erica pulling them out, they sunk deeper into the background. They never connected, not properly, not like they could have.

Boyd never really wanted power. All he ever wanted was that feeling of pack. He found it in Erica, but never in Isaac. They saw slivers of it, brief glimpses of the friendship that could have been if only they were brave enough to close their fists around it. But they never did. Isaac

doesn't know what held Boyd back, never got close enough to know what he was afraid of.

Isaac was afraid of what his power could do, afraid of the harm he could inflict, afraid he could hold on too tight. Could, could, could. Always anticipating, always hesitating, always too late.

Isaac wonders what could have happened if he had been willing to be selfish that night, if he'd been willing to risk everything for the closest thing he had to a friend. Isaac wonders what could have been if he had saved Boyd instead of Jennifer.

He wonders what Boyd would say if he could see him now, if he could see *Derek* now. Isaac wonders if they could have found pack together.

Erica and Boyd ran because, for them, that hint of hope was enough. The small chance at being happy and *together* was worth running and dying for it. It was worth the risk, so they ran.

Isaac could have gone with them. He almost did, but it just wasn't his path. Isaac got a hint of kindness from Scott, and that was enough. The small chance at being good and *trusted* was worth fighting and dying for. It was worth the risk, so Isaac stayed.

Isaac made his choice. He's here to help. He's here to win.

—

Smoke grenades are thrown into the building.

"Get back!" Braeden yells, but it's too late. The grenades hit the ground, exploding in a flash of light and an eruption of fog. It starts at the floor, gradually rising up and up, clouding their vision and making it hard to breathe.

The gunfire begins.

Isaac ducks behind a wall, listening to the rapid firing of automatic weapons. Red lines of light fall over the room, crisscrossing together and scoping out prey. There's more used-to-be hunters than Isaac could have anticipated. They're everywhere.

Isaac breathes in deep. He thinks of Erica and Boyd and the lost potential. He thinks of the decision to stay and fight. Isaac finds his spark, and he ignites it. He comes into his power, no longer afraid to use it.

Isaac shifts.

When the next laser of light cuts along his hiding wall, Isaac steps into the fog. He steps right into the red line, letting it settle on his chest without a single shred of fear.

He fights.

Isaac runs at the hunter, kicking him hard in the chest. The hunter fumbles backwards. He pulls the trigger, firing his gun aimlessly on a teetering balance. It's a bad decision. Isaac grabs the weapon, twisting the hunter's arm and forcing his bullets into the other assassins. They're wearing bulletproof gear, so it won't reach flesh, it won't stop or kill them, but it's an inconvenience and a hindrance nonetheless.

That's all this is. They're not fighting to win. They're fighting to survive and distract. They're fighting for time.

So, Isaac muscles the gun out of the hunter's hands, holding it for himself. Isaac isn't dumb enough to try firing a gun without any prior training – outside of that one tranquilizer – but he is dumb enough to use it in a less conventional way. He slams the butt of the gun into the man's face. Isaac hears his nose crack and smells the gush of blood, but he doesn't stop.

There's a hunter at Isaac's back. He heard him coming before the snap of bone, but he waited. He let the hunter think he had him unaware, and, now, at the very last second, Isaac turns.

Except, Isaac brings the first hunter with him. He uses the man as a shield, letting the second accidentally empty a clip into friend instead of foe. Then, Isaac shoves hard at the first hunter, sending him toppling into the second. They go down like dominos.

A third hunter-turned-assassin approaches. Isaac drops the borrowed gun to his feet and comes in blazing hot. He moves quickly, aiming low. He forces a knee into the hunter's groin, reveling just a little in the answering groan of pain. The hunter hunches in on himself and Isaac, giving him a chance to land a harsh punch to the throat. It's not the best utilization of his claws or fangs, but it gets the hunter to the ground and that's all that matters.

Isaac crouches. He pins the hunter by his neck, using just enough pressure to inflict fear and let his claws tickle their throat. He doesn't restrict blood flow or draw any to the surface, just brings the hunter still. He takes his gun, sliding it across the floor and well out of reach.

With the hunter unarmed and at least momentarily incapacitated, Isaac moves on. He doesn't want to stay in the same spot or position for too long, doesn't want to leave himself vulnerable by focusing on one enemy when there are plenty of others.

Isaac rounds a corner. He plans to catch his breath and check his surroundings, but finds himself almost immediately cornered by two hunters.

Isaac curses, but he doesn't give up. If he can drop their weapons, he can take them. He just has to avoid getting shot.

Isaac growls, fangs and claws out, aiming for an intimidation tactic. It doesn't work.

Well, he was aiming for intimidation, but he wasn't counting on it.

Isaac taps into his senses, allowing time to slow. The hunter on Isaac's left is perfectly still while the hunter on his right has a finger grazing the trigger, twitching just slightly.

Isaac attacks the right first. He doesn't pause, just lunges. He pretends the gun isn't even there, ignoring the danger in order to move without apprehension. He gets in a swipe to the face and an elbow to the gut before he gets shot.

It comes from the hunter on his left, meeting the back of his right shoulder with a burst of pain and a flood of red. The bullet hits too high on his body to do any fatal or lasting damage, but it does knock him off center. The impact sends him forward, bumping into the hunter on the right. Isaac tries to maintain his stability and control, but the hunter is shoving him with a hand not still holding his gun.

Isaac staggers backwards, disoriented between the pair of assailants.

"Isaac, get down!"

Isaac listens. He doesn't think, just listens like his body was commanded to do so. He drops to the floor, quickly scrambling out from the middle of the hunters. He keeps going until his back hits a wall. Only then does he take notice of the fight and the savior.

Argent is standing on the other side of the hallway, partially concealed behind a bashed in wall. He's shooting wildly, taking out the hunters who almost took out Isaac.

Then, in Isaac's peripheral vision, there's movement. He turns at once, arm on his uninjured side already pressing against the floor and preparing to force himself to his feet, but he doesn't have to. It's Brett. He comes to a skidding stop beside Isaac, holding out a hand. Brett carefully helps him back up, mindful of the bullet wound in his upper back.

"There's too many of them," Brett says.

"We can't give up," Isaac answers, voice a little strained. He's rolling his right shoulder, wincing at the pain but pushing through it, growing accustomed to the sensation.

Two more hunters enter their hallway.

Isaac looks at Brett. He nods. They attack, each taking on one of the hunters.

Isaac makes sure to keep Brett in his line of sight. This is about protecting and saving Satomi's pack, but, honestly, Brett doesn't need saving. He fights with the same harsh determination he brings to the lacrosse field, ruthless in his blows. He's vicious and strong, and Isaac is too.

First, Isaac and Brett remove the guns from the equation, eliminating the biggest hazard. Then, they get into a real strategy. With the guns out of the way, they subtly maneuver the hunters till they're standing back to back, not touching but not far apart either. Once in position, using the strength of two pissed off werewolves, they slam them into each other.

The hunters fall to the ground.

Brett flashes Isaac a shocked, spur of the moment grin. Then, he turns around and takes off running deeper into the warehouse.

Kids, Isaac thinks.

—

The fight stretches on for ages. The hunters seem to be multiplying, or, at the very least, their numbers aren't dwindling.

Luckily, the fighters on the side of the good aren't going down easy either. They're battling it out, strong and unshakable. They aren't going anywhere.

“Isaac!”

Isaac hears Scott’s voice calling his name, and he wants to listen, wants to figure out where he is and what’s wrong, but he can’t. He can’t let himself get distracted.

Isaac just keeps fighting the hunters in front of him.

Isaac doesn’t have a gun. He only has claws and fangs, meaning he can’t fight at a distance. It would be a disadvantage, if not for his speed.

Once the hunters spot him, they have to take aim and pull a trigger. Unfortunately for them, Isaac can get within striking distance before that ever happens. He continuously launches himself at the hunters, delivering swift hits and even sharper jabs.

A hunter comes at Isaac, gun pointed and ready, but Isaac grabs him by the viewfinder of his helmet. He yanks hard, pulling the hunter’s head down to meet his knee. Then, Isaac pushes him back by the same grip, kicking him in the stomach. The hunter topples backwards, gun clattering to the floor.

Isaac keeps up the pattern. He keeps going as fast as he possibly can, hardly breathing or thinking at all. He keeps disabling guns and sending assassins to the ground. He doesn’t kill, but he doesn’t hold back either. He does just enough damage, and then he moves on.

Isaac gets shot a second time, but it barely counts for anything. The bullet clips his side, only grazing his skin without a full impact. It only serves to wake him up further, pain adding to his adrenaline and making Isaac fight back even harder.

That hunter got a very personal punch to the face.

Isaac doesn’t think, doesn’t breath, doesn’t stop. He keeps fighting for all that he has.

Until, suddenly, the hunters stop shooting. The sound of gunfire falls from the air, replaced by phones buzzing and beeping.

Isaac ends up next to Braeden, watching as the hunters reach for their phones. Braeden moves fast, grabbing the nearest hunter and getting him into an effortless headlock. She takes his phone from his hand, looks at it for herself, then holds up the screen for Isaac to see.

THE BENEFACTOR: ALL CONTRACTS TERMINATED.

They find each other in the aftermath.

Derek isn't far from Braeden and Isaac, quickly rushing over to check for damage. The bullet is still lodged somewhere in Isaac's trapezius, causing a small whine of pain when Derek cups his shoulder, but he's okay. Nothing a trip to Dr. Deaton or Melissa can't fix.

Brett shows up next, shadowed by five of his other pack members. They don't look much worse than they did before, not an injury sustained that isn't well on its way to being healed.

Argent and Satomi come next, covered in dust and rivulets of blood. Isaac thanks Argent for saving his life before. Argent only smiles something slight and sad.

Scott and Lori appear last. Lori runs right up to Brett, hugging her brother with a fierceness that can't be rivaled. Scott approaches more slowly. He stops in front of Isaac, where the circle has formed around himself and Braeden. Scott looks just as beat up as the rest of them, if not even more so, but he's still standing.

"Is it over?" Isaac asks.

Scott looks around, drinking in the sight of the survivors. "Yeah," his eyes fall back to Isaac, "it's over."

They did it. They made it through the night. They stopped the dead pool. They're alive.

It's over.

A Promise to the Dead

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 4 episode 11

Word count: 7,913

"It doesn't feel like it's over," Isaac tells Melissa. They're sitting outside a coffee shop in not-so-comfortable metal chairs, sipping drinks and catching up.

"But it is, isn't it? The dead pool was stopped," Melissa says. She keeps her voice low even though the tables around them are empty.

Isaac nods, "Yeah. It just... It all happened so quickly. There's so much I still don't get. Like, why would Meredith put her own name on a hit list? *And* there's the fact that *Peter* was involved."

"You sound angry about that last part," Melissa says, a hint of a smile playing at her features. "Scott told me Peter doesn't remember coming up with the plan."

"But no one can prove that. Only Peter knows what the coma was like, and he's a notorious liar," Isaac says. He doesn't want to sound like he's arguing, he's just... suspicious.

"Is this about Derek?" Melissa asks.

Isaac sighs, running a hand through his hair. "Am I that obvious?"

"Maybe I just know you well enough," Melissa shrugs.

Isaac smiles, feeling fuzzy around the edges. Still, he says, "Deaton's trying to figure out what's going on with his powers, but he's losing them, and then there's Kate coming back, and now Peter and – I don't know. I'm just worried."

"The only thing you can do is talk to him," Melissa says. "I know Derek isn't one for words and neither are most teenage boys, but you have to communicate. All you can do is try to talk about it."

"Yeah," Isaac says. "Thanks, Melissa." Then, "So, how do you feel finally having Special Agent Dickhead out of the house?"

Isaac is just hanging up with Scott when he hears it. The loft alarm.

Isaac quickly jumps out of bed. He doesn't hesitate or even think about it. He walks with light feet, holding the railing and cautiously creeping down the stairs.

Isaac finds Derek and Braeden both scantily dressed with guns in their hands. They're scouting out the loft, looking for signs of forced entry or movement. Braeden spots Isaac first, pointing her gun at him as soon as his feet drop from the bottom step. Isaac doesn't flinch.

It takes half a second for Braeden to recognize that he's not a threat. When she does, she doesn't lower her gun, but she does redirect her aim.

Isaac takes another step into the loft. Rain is falling on the windows and they're breathing a little shaky, but otherwise the loft is quiet, almost eerily so.

Isaac meets Derek's gaze. His green eyes are lit with uncertainty. And, Isaac realizes, he doesn't have night vision. Derek can't see well in the dark. Not anymore. Not like he used to.

Isaac remembers going blind in the Hale vault, remembers being disoriented and scared. He moves closer to Derek.

"Guys," Braeden whispers, though it barely counts as one. It's an exhale of breath more than anything, the smallest drop of sound.

Isaac follows her line of sight. Light pours from underneath the gap of the loft door, but it's broken up by a silhouette, a shadow with two legs and two feet.

Derek raises his gun higher, moving towards the door with quick and quiet movements, triskele tattoo rippling over his back as he goes. Braeden and Isaac stand on either side, waiting for what's to come.

Derek carefully releases the lock on the door. He grabs the handle. He spares one glance back at Braeden, then Isaac. He pulls.

The door slides open. Braeden cocks her gun and Isaac flicks out his claws.

It's Lydia. She's standing in the open doorway, dripping wet from the

rain. She *screams*.

Isaac wakes the next morning from a fitful sleep. Lydia's sudden appearance did nothing to help ease the feeling of *not over yet*, but there's no action to be taken. All Isaac can really do is get up and keep moving forward.

And so, Isaac climbs out of bed and into his shower.

When he emerges, towel slung around his hips and hair dripping down his neck, he hears voices downstairs.

"Don't you wanna know why it took so long to return it?"

It's Scott's voice. Isaac didn't know he was coming over. He hadn't mentioned it in their phone call last night, but that was before a banshee showed up on their doorstep. Maybe a change of plans was necessary.

"How much do you make at the animal clinic?"

That's Derek. The question confuses Isaac. He certainly doesn't sound like he's talking about Lydia.

"Minimum wage."

Isaac maybe shouldn't be eavesdropping, but, now, he's curious. Besides, there's only so much he can do without a proper door and werewolf hearing amplifying every word.

"That's why. Everyone can be tempted, Scott. Even a true alpha."

The topic of conversation is becoming clear: money.

"You're not angry?"

Isaac waits.

"It's not even mine. It belongs to Peter."

Isaac puts the pieces together. Somehow, somehow, Scott came into possession of some money from the dead pool. Now, he's returning it to Derek.

"Where's your money?"

Isaac moves on, actually trying to ignore the conversation now. He focuses on drying off his hair and starting to get dressed. Still, the words filter up the stairs without his consent.

“You’re standing on it.”

Isaac subconsciously glances down at his feet.

“There’s another vault?”

Isaac smothers his laughter into his hand.

“No. I own the building.” Derek doesn’t bother hiding his laugh. *“And I have my own bank accounts. All the money from the vault was Peter’s. I think we’d actually be better off if the rest never came back.”*

Isaac hears the telltale sound of a zipper closing. He waits for footsteps, waits for Scott to leave.

He doesn’t.

“I know Lydia was here last night.”

Isaac listens a little more intently. He stays perfectly still, shoe halfway tied and halfway ready for school.

“Deaton’s still working on figuring out what Kate did to you. If anyone can find an answer, it’s him.”

Isaac’s not so sure he agrees. Isaac knows Deaton is trustworthy, knows he’s often the one to propose a solution. But, the solution often brings with it a substantial risk. It always comes at a cost.

Derek doesn’t say anything, and, not for the first time, Isaac wonders how he can be so calm. There’s no rising heartbeat or flooding chemosignals. Derek is perfectly relaxed. Isaac wonders if the calm is genuine. He wonders if Derek is really okay, or if he’s gotten good at hiding things from Isaac again.

Scott still doesn’t leave.

“Is Isaac upstairs? I can give him a ride to school.”

Isaac freezes at the sound of his name.

“Yeah, he’s up there hiding out. He’s got a fear of confrontation.”

Isaac releases a humorless puff of air, tongue pushing into his cheek. He quickly finishes tying his shoes, grabs his backpack, and appears at the top of the stairs. He rounds the spiral, coming to a stop at the bottom. He glares at Derek.

Then, to Scott, expression softened, “I’ll take that ride.”

Scott smiles, something like amusement flickering in his eyes.

Isaac leads Scott out to the elevator. Scott’s eyebrows raise in quiet surprise, but he doesn’t mention it. Instead, as the doors close, he says, “You didn’t tell me you went for coffee with my mom.”

“I got a smoothie,” Isaac says in place of a real answer.

Scott laughs, breathy and light, “Well, whatever you ordered, I’m glad you went. My mom asks about you all the time.”

“She does?” Isaac asks, looking at Scott. He knows there’s shock on his face, but he can’t hide it.

Scott smiles some more. “You might not realize this, Isaac, but you make an impression. In fact, you’re pretty hard not to like.”

Isaac glances down at his feet again, but, this time, it’s a conscious choice. He ducks his head to hide the smile on his lips and the pink dusting his cheeks.

—

Isaac has a free period, and, while he doesn’t really need the exercise, he does need the distraction. Besides, Isaac likes spending time with Stiles. And, even more than that, he likes making fun of Stiles. Practicing lacrosse gives him plenty of opportunity for both.

Another ball lands neatly in the net of Isaac’s stick. He didn’t even have to move to catch it.

“You know you’re supposed to be aiming for the goal, right?” Isaac says, voice raised in volume just enough to be heard across the field.

It’s the *third* time Stiles has somehow managed to throw a ball directly into Isaac’s net. It would be impressive if it wasn’t the complete opposite of their objective.

Stiles groans. “Are you *sure* you’re not using any wolf powers?”

Isaac laughs, tossing the ball back to Stiles. It's a soft throw, but Stiles still fumbles to retrieve it.

"Hey! You caught that one!" Isaac cheers, but it sounds snide even to his own ears.

"How about we take it down a notch with the snark," Stiles grumbles.

Isaac smiles, but doesn't say anything. He waits for Stiles to regroup. He adjusts his grip on his stick a few times, eyes squinting in concentration. Then, Stiles shoots. This time, Isaac does have to move. He slides a foot out to the right, leaning his weight and snagging the ball out of the air.

Isaac hears Stiles curse a frustrated, "Shit!"

He looks like he wants to throw his stick down and give up. Isaac takes pity.

"You're thinking too much," Isaac says, taking a couple steps forward to shorten the distance between them. "I mean, usually you don't seem to care that you suck. Why does it matter now?"

Stiles huffs. He kicks at the grass, toes scuffing and pulling up a few blades and a splutter of dirt. "Malia's coming to the game tomorrow."

"Ohh," Isaac catches on. He remembers Derek coming to their first scrimmage. It's not the same dynamic – not at all, ew, gross – but Isaac remembers feeling the pressure. Isaac remembers wanting to perform well enough to make him proud.

Isaac thinks it's a little different for Stiles though. He thinks it's less about making Malia proud, and more about impressing her.

"Well, how much does Malia really know about lacrosse?" Isaac says, trying to boost his confidence.

Stiles' eyebrows lower, leveling Isaac with an impassive stare. "Enough to read a scoreboard."

Isaac winces, "Right, yeah, sorry."

"So, are you going to help me or not?" Stiles asks. He's pouting and fiddling with his stick, looking put out. It's like it physically pains him to ask Isaac for advice.

"Sure," Isaac says, letting him go easy without the usual level of

sarcasm. “Let’s work on your back shots. They suck.”

Isaac spins the twin knives around his fingers, swinging them into the firm grip of his fists. He jabs first with the right, punching forward and pulling down as if he was cutting through the air. He follows up immediately with the left dagger, repeating the motion. Simultaneously, he’s twirling the right, ready to swipe again.

Isaac’s been practicing with the ring daggers in every spare moment, even more so since the threat of the dead pool was eliminated. It’s given him a distraction. It’s a demanding practice, one that takes all of his focus and energy. It’s all but exhausting, and Isaac revels in it. It feels productive, it feels like preparation. And, at the end of the day, his body and mind are too worn down for anxiety or nightmares.

And, in all of his dedication, Isaac has started to improve. He’s started to really see the benefits of the daggers. Isaac still hasn’t mastered the spinning of the rings, but he’s seen how the weapon works. He’s seen how it can turn lethal. Once the technique has been perfected, the rings allow for nonstop, continuous movement. The knives are constantly rotating, and, with sharp edges all around, the daggers are piercing at every point.

Isaac has *felt* these daggers embedded in his skin, but now he *sees* how they work. He sees how the daggers move, synched together and flowing in a river of hurt. They spin fast and precise, becoming a force that’s hard to block and even harder to dodge.

Isaac drops a dagger. He loses control of the rotation, ring slipping through his fingers. It clatters to the ground.

Then, there’s a slow clap. Isaac startles. He turns around, finding Derek standing there.

“You’re getting better,” Derek says. The compliment is lackluster, but his proud smile isn’t.

“Really?” Isaac asks, mopping the sweat from his brow. He’s flushed with exertion and definitely tired, but he feels good. He feels accomplished.

Derek nods. He steps forward, leaning down to pick up the lost knife. He holds it out to Isaac, “I mean, except for the part where I was able to sneak up on you. You’re supposed to be the one with werewolf

senses, remember?”

Isaac takes the dagger, staring down at his hands. He adjusts his hold, angling the knives pointed down and circling one in each fist. His fingers grip loose around them, thumbs mindlessly tracing the blunt handles. He’s thinking about Derek losing his powers. He’s thinking about what Melissa said, about talking and communicating.

“What is it?” Derek asks.

Isaac looks up, mouth twisting until, “You’re really not worried about losing your power?”

It’s barely a question, but Derek hears his intention. Isaac doesn’t outright accuse Derek of putting up a front or purposely hiding his emotions, but the implication is clear.

“I’m really not worried,” Derek confirms. “I wouldn’t hide it from you.”

Isaac nods. He knows that. He really does. He just doesn’t get it.

Finally, Isaac asks, “*Why* aren’t you worried?”

Derek should be worried.

Derek used to be so obsessed with power. He chased it constantly, not caring if he put himself or others at risk. He was always looking to gain a little more, to get an edge on the opposition. He used to crave power.

And the thing is: Derek isn’t like Isaac. Derek never had to seek out power. He was born with super-strength and super-speed. He was born with abilities that others would kill for. He’s never been human. He’s never been powerless. But he has felt like he was.

When his first love died in his arms, when his family burned to the ground, Derek was powerless to stop it. He had no control, and he blamed himself for their deaths – still does. He felt weak, and he turned power hungry. He was never satisfied. He always needed more.

Derek should be worried, but he isn’t. *Why isn’t he worried?*

“I – I don’t know. I’m just not,” Derek says.

It’s not a satisfying answer. Isaac wants more. He wants an explanation.

It was one thing for Derek to sacrifice being an alpha in exchange for Isaac's life. It took some time, but, eventually, Isaac accepted that Derek valued his life more than his own power. Eventually, Isaac accepted that Derek cared about him with no ulterior motive, no ploy or manipulation. Eventually, Isaac accepted the act as a genuine desire to save and protect.

But this? This is something else entirely. There's nothing to be gained here. There's no exchange of power for safety. Isaac's life isn't at risk – at least, no more than normal. The only one at risk here is Derek. And he doesn't care.

"Isaac?" Derek speaks, drawing him out of his daze.

Isaac hums his response, meeting Derek's eyes.

"Are you okay?" Derek asks.

Isaac hesitates. "If you're okay, I'm okay."

It's the truth. He's still a little terrified, but if Derek really isn't worried, if he's really grown so far removed from his days of power addiction, then maybe that's okay. Maybe that's a good thing.

Isaac moves, breaking the moment. He walks past Derek and into the open kitchen, setting his daggers down on the counter. He grabs a bottle of water from the fridge, gulping down big swallows of the cool liquid. He drains the bottle in seconds, tossing it to the recycling.

Then, Isaac turns. Derek has relocated, sitting on the couch and watching Isaac in attempted subtlety. (He doesn't quite hit the mark.)

Isaac watches Derek in return. Derek is leaning his weight forward, resting elbows on his knees. Knees that are almost bumping the coffee table. The coffee table that no longer houses Garrett's lacrosse bag. The money is gone. *Hm.*

Isaac knows that if he speaks, he'll lose the opportunity to further the discussion. As long as silence hangs in the air, there's a chance for a reprise. There's a chance Derek will open up and express his vulnerabilities.

But, Isaac also knows it's slim. He knows Derek is just as likely to get up and walk away.

So, instead of staying silent, Isaac seizes the moment before the

window closes. An idea is lingering at the back of his mind, one that's been growing in strength every day since their return from Mexico. Isaac has been waiting for the right time to bring it up, and he knows this is it.

"Did you ever have a job in high school?"

Derek blinks. "What?"

"Did you ever have a job in high school?" Isaac repeats. He releases his sleeves from where they're bunched up past his elbows, using them to properly wipe the perspiration from his skin.

"No. No, I didn't," Derek says. He doesn't mention the fire or the family wealth or any of the reasons why, but Isaac knows. He knew the answer before he even asked, but it was the only place he could think to begin. "And you don't need one. You *don't* owe me anything, Isaac."

"I... I know that," Isaac says. He's not lying. He knows Derek's generosity isn't transactional, knows his motive is in ensuring that Isaac is cared for. He knows Derek doesn't expect anything in return, though that still makes him feel just a little queasy.

"Then why are you asking?" Derek questions. He's still leaning against his knees, looking at Isaac from across the room with upturned eyes and patient confusion.

"It's just. I've been thinking about independence and it's..." Isaac swallows. "It's something I would want. Maybe? I don't know. It's like, every day, I'm getting a little closer to actually surviving high school and I – I feel like I need some kind of plan."

"Well, if I have any say in the matter, you'll definitely be surviving high school," Derek says, too grave to be a joke. "If you want a plan, I'll help you make one." Then, lighter, "You're not allowed to work in a cemetery though. You never know what kind of creeps are lurking around."

Isaac laughs.

—

Isaac is sketching in art class with Lydia at his side in her new normal seat. She's quiet, though it's not unusual. They never talk much. Mostly, they just sit together, content to enjoy each other's presence

and bask in the company of an almost friend.

Something's different today. Isaac doesn't know quite what it is, but Lydia's silence isn't easy. It's tense and heavy.

"Are you okay?" Isaac asks.

Lydia jumps a little, graphite scratching up her sketchbook in a messy, harsh line, completely out of place among the precision of her piece. She shoots Isaac a glare.

He scrunches his nose in apology, "Sorry."

Lydia huffs, a little exhale of annoyance that Isaac knows to be fake. She sets down the pencil, giving Isaac her focus.

Lydia Martin's full attention is an intensity Isaac hasn't yet gotten used to. Her gaze is unlike any Isaac has felt before. She isn't like Stiles who looks far within to analyze or comprehend. She isn't like Scott – or even Allison – who looks with kindness and sees more than what meets the eye. Lydia looks at him plainly, seeing exactly who he presents himself to be. Not because she can't look deeper, but because she doesn't need to. She sees who he is on the surface, and has all the information she needs.

And, now, she's watching him expectantly.

Isaac stammers, "Uh. I asked if you're okay."

"I know that," Lydia says. "I want to know why you asked."

She gives Isaac just enough. She gives just enough softness that Isaac knows she isn't being nasty, she isn't baiting him into a trap. Isaac still doesn't know her very well, but he's beginning to understand. He's beginning to understand that she's a master at affectation and deception. He's beginning to understand that her cruelty has only ever been a shield.

"I don't know," Isaac admits. "You just seem... off."

Lydia hums. She's rubbing her forefinger and thumb together, like she can feel the traces of graphite on her skin. She says, voice too saccharine for the words, "I have this feeling. Like something's coming."

"I feel it too," Isaac says. Lydia keeps watching him, eyebrows

drawing together just so. Isaac stays steady, “I just don’t know if it’s because there’s *actually* another threat, or if it’s hypervigilance.”

“I’ve been feeling it since Oak Creek,” she says. (Isaac doesn’t want to talk about Oak Creek.) “But we haven’t exactly had a break since then.”

Lydia’s eyes dart to the left. It’s the slightest movement, just the quickest break of her character and their connection. For just a second, Isaac gets a glimpse of something real. He sees a flutter of someone scared, of someone in pain. Isaac can’t let the moment pass.

“Do you want to do something after school?”

At first, Lydia stays quiet. She looks away and picks up her pencil. She erases the streak of imperfection, carefully concealing any traces of flaw. Isaac thinks she’s going to ignore him completely, but then, still quiet, she says, “Okay.”

—

Isaac meets Lydia at her car, expecting her to drive them somewhere. Instead, she asks, “Do you want to just walk?”

Isaac shrugs, doesn’t mind either way. “Sure.”

He lets Lydia lead the way, following her confident strides. Isaac doesn’t know how she can walk in high heels, but she does so with ease, marching forward with purpose. They still don’t talk. They just walk in silence through the bustling crowd of the school grounds and onto the peaceful sidewalks.

Lydia leads, and Isaac follows. Until, eventually, they arrive at a playground. Isaac hasn’t been here for at least a decade. He tries not to think about it.

“What are we doing here?” Isaac asks. He stands just on the edge, not yet stepping down into the mulch.

Lydia ignores his hesitation, continuing on towards her destination with the same level of determination. She looks over her shoulder, and shrugs, “I like swings.”

She carries up the statement with an act to prove it, sitting down on one of the swings. She leans forward to remove her heels, revealing toes painted just a shade too light to be considered red. Then, she sets

her shoes aside and presses into the dirt to start a gentle sway.

“You coming?” she calls.

Isaac, seeing as he’s already come this far, jumps into the deep end.

He joins her on the swings. His height’s a little awkward, leaving his legs stretched out far in front of him and pulling soft laughter from Lydia’s throat. She beams at him, something youthful and free.

Here, in this space, they talk.

“Have you always lived in Beacon Hills?” Lydia asks. She pushes herself a little stronger, a little more intentioned. The movement causes a light gust of wind, ruffling her hair so it billows out around her. She doesn’t stop to fix it.

Isaac holds the chains of his swing in each hand, rocking only slightly. “I think so.”

Lydia doesn’t question his uncertainty. “I moved here when I was six. Dad got some cushy job.” She’s not properly swinging, just pushing herself once and then letting nature take its course, slowing down to an almost stop. Then, she does it again. “Not that that matters now. We aren’t seeing any of the money.”

“I remember when you moved here,” Isaac admits.

Lydia looks at him, an uncharacteristically timid smile quirking her lips. “You do?”

“Yeah,” Isaac laughs. “I’d, um – oh my god, sorry, this is so embarrassing – I’d never seen a redhead in real life before. I went home and told my brother that Ariel was in my class.”

Lydia stops swinging completely. She comes to an abrupt halt, bare feet hitting the ground. Her mouth has dropped open and she’s staring at Isaac with laughter bubbling up to the surface.

“What?” Isaac asks, eyebrows pulling in confusion.

She shakes her head, “You’re a wonder, Isaac Lahey.”

—

They stay at the park until the sun starts to slide towards the horizon, a bright blaze shining in their eyes as Isaac’s phone buzzes with

worried messages from Derek.

"I'll walk you back to your car," Isaac says.

"Are you being a gentleman or hoping I'll drive you home?" Lydia asks, looking up at him and putting her shoes back on.

Isaac shrugs, "Both?"

Lydia grins, green eyes sparkling in the setting sun. "For your honesty, I'll give you a ride."

She says it like the decision was still up in the air, but Isaac knows it wasn't. He knows Lydia was never going to let him walk home, but he lets her keep up the facade. He lets her keep her power. (Someone should get to.)

As they walk back to the school, Isaac starts to return to reality. The crushing weight of responsibility returns to his shoulders, and, with it, comes a question left unanswered.

"Hey, Lydia?" Isaac asks.

Lydia keeps walking, "Hm?"

"I'm going to ask you something, but if the answer is too upsetting, you can just ignore me," Isaac says. He waits for Lydia's nod. Then, he asks, "Why did Meredith put her own name on the dead pool?"

The question has the potential to destroy their quiet evening and tentative peace, but it's been haunting him. Isaac has to ask.

Lydia stops walking. "You just had to ruin it, didn't you?"

She's not mad, Isaac knows. Still, he pauses next to her, breathes, "I'm sorry."

Lydia tilts her head. "You know, that's the third time you've apologized to me today." She's smiling. Though, here, in the real world, it's less carefree, more calculated.

"You're keeping count?" Isaac tries to joke, tries to tease, but Lydia doesn't let it land. She just raises her eyebrows, lips pulling to one side. She waits. Isaac sighs, "Well, maybe I'm trying to make up for almost killing you that one time."

Lydia laughs. "*Please*. You barely even tried."

Isaac goes blank. He stares at Lydia with Allison's voice echoing in his head.

Lydia's eyebrows drop as she squints at him. "What?"

"Nothing," Isaac says at once. When Lydia doesn't look away or start walking, he mumbles, "Just something Allison said."

Lydia smears her lips together, light sheen of gloss spreading as she nods slowly. "Right."

"Sorry," Isaac says. This time, it's purposeful, not a genuine apology, but a breaking of the tension.

Lydia's amusement peeks through. She repeats, "Right."

They start walking again, falling back into silence. It's still a little heavy, a little tense, but it's not uncomfortable. It's not awkward. It's a familiar silence. One marked, not by having nothing to say, but by having no desire to speak.

Lydia doesn't answer Isaac's question until they're in her car and pulling out of the parking lot. "Meredith said she heard me scream in the tunnels. That's why she did it."

The words don't register at first. Isaac blinks, feeling nothing. Then, he blinks again, and part of his resolve crumbles. The words hit like a sledgehammer against his ribcage, sending his body into disarray and banging at his carefully constructed walls.

"What?"

Lydia doesn't repeat herself. She doesn't have to, and she knows it. Isaac heard Lydia just fine.

And he heard her at Oak Creek too. Hers was a piercing scream, the kind that rattles your lungs and feels like it will never stop. Just thinking about it is enough to make tears spring to Isaac's eyes. Just thinking about it, thinking about the fresh pain of a wound torn open, is enough to make Isaac pause.

It's enough for Isaac to think, just for a second, that maybe Meredith was right. Maybe it was time to start over. Maybe the world would have been safer without them in it. Maybe they should wipe the slate clean. If it meant keeping the humans alive – Stiles, Melissa, Argent, Allison, possibly Derek – maybe it would have been worth it.

“Isaac,” Lydia says. Her eyes are on the road, but her voice just borrows the intensity from her gaze instead.

Isaac blinks, and then, he wipes at his wet eyes. “S—”

“Don’t you dare apologize,” Lydia says, gentle and kind. The intensity drops along with a tear down Isaac’s cheek. And that’s the end of that.

“You... went to a playground? With Lydia?” Scott asks, skeptical.

“She likes swings,” Isaac says with a small shrug and an even smaller smile. He’s thinking about Lydia so unabashed and open. He wonders how many people have had the luxury of seeing her so true. “I don’t know how it happened. Well, I mean, I do. I asked her to hang out. The playground thing was her idea though.”

Scott sounds like he’s laughing. *“You can never tell Stiles. He would be so jealous.”*

“It – It wasn’t like that,” Isaac says, probably a beat too quick.

“Isaac, I know,” Scott says, dragging out the vowel and laughing a little harder. *“Stiles would know that too, but that wouldn’t stop him from trying to kill you.”*

The momentary tightening of Isaac’s throat fades, broken by a laugh of his own, “Okay, maybe. But he seems really happy with Malia.”

“Oh, he is! Totally! It’s just – I mean. It’s Lydia,” Scott says, like he’s verbally shrugging. *“I guess it is different now. He’s with Malia, and, you’re right, he’s really happy with her and they’re so good together. Plus, he actually knows Lydia, like, they’re friends and... I don’t know. Why are we talking about this?”*

He sounds unsure, like he’s cutting himself off, not necessarily because he wants to, but because he feels that he has to. Isaac tries to assuage that, wants to hear anything and everything Scott has to say. “Cause they’re our friends and this is the stuff normal teenagers probably talk about?”

“Yeah,” Scott chuckles. *“Probably.”*

“You know Stiles has been making me practice lacrosse with him?” Isaac readjusts in his bed and settles further into the conversation.

“He’s trying to get good to impress Malia at tomorrow night’s game.”

“He’s ‘making’ you?”

“Okay, he asked a little bit nicely, and I said yes, but he’s made me regret it every single second since,” Isaac says, smiling because no one can see.

“Isn’t that how it always goes with Stiles?” Scott asks. Isaac doesn’t get a chance to answer because he continues with a quick, *“Oh! Before I forget, Kira should be back for the game tomorrow.”*

“Our odds for winning just went up, like, fifty percent,” Isaac says, only partly joking.

“Yeah, definitely,” Scott says, sounding almost excited. Then, *“Her mom is finally being discharged either tomorrow or the next day, so I’m going out to Beacon County tomorrow to stop by and then I’m driving Kira home.”*

“That’s nice of you,” Isaac says lamely.

Scott chuckles, *“Oh, for sure. In the long list of sacrifices I’ve made for the greater good, this is the most harrowing by far.”*

Isaac likes hearing this side of Scott, unfiltered and rightfully disdained. He’s so real at night, a little less of who he’s supposed to be and a little more of who he truly is. Isaac likes it.

Joy builds in his chest, a swirl of sweet honey settling thick at his center. His happiness spills out uninhibited, creating a light but *real* sound. It’s only laughter, but it makes Isaac’s mouth go sugary. He blames it on remnants of toothpaste.

“Isaac, seriously, you’ve checked your phone like fifteen times in the last five minutes. What’s going on?” Derek asks. He’s driving, eyes focused on the road, but drifting over to Isaac for just a second.

“Scott was supposed to text me when he and Kira got back to Beacon Hills, but I haven’t heard from him,” Isaac says. He knows he’s frowning.

“I’m sure he just forgot,” Derek says casually.

Isaac nods. He tries to convince himself that it’s just an accident, just a

slip of Scott's memory, but he doesn't believe it. With all that they've experienced, Scott knows how important it is to check in and keep each other updated. And, when Scott says he's going to do something, he always follows through.

Still, Isaac just says, "Yeah. Maybe."

"Why are you so worried?" Derek asks.

Isaac shrugs, "We need Scott and Kira if we want a chance at winning."

It's not a lie, but it's not the truth either. It's the feeling of foreboding. It's growing stronger.

—

Isaac and Stiles are walking into the locker room together, lacrosse bags slung over shoulders, when Liam approaches. He darts up to them, a little frantic, "Why isn't Scott with you? Is something wrong?"

"Everything's fine," Stiles says, pushing open the locker room door and disregarding the panic like a pro. He's not rude about it, but he doesn't indulge either. He walks the line, practiced and effortless. "I got a text from him this morning, he said he might be a little late."

"How late is late? Is he always late?" Liam asks, frenetic energy coming off him in waves. He's standing toe to toe with Stiles, barely taking a breath. "We're playing Devenford Prep again and this time it's an actual game. He – He shouldn't be late."

"Who shouldn't be late?"

Liam's done it now. He's gotten Coach's attention.

Isaac and Stiles both turn on Liam, something like, *this is your fault, you deal with it*.

Liam slumps. Stiles tips his head, gesturing for Liam to explain. He steps up, albeit grudgingly. "Scott and Kira."

Isaac, feeling a little sorry for the kid, adds, "They might be slightly late."

"W-w-w-w—" Coach stammers impressively, followed by his usual brand of unwarranted outrage, "Slightly late is *still late*. What – What are they doing?"

There's a pause. Stiles' mouth opens with a quiet pop. He falters, eyebrows lifting, "They're... They're doing something that's going to make them slightly late."

"What could Scott and Kira be doing *right now* that's more important than playing in the first game?" Coach asks, moving in and escalating in his exasperation.

Stiles glances at Isaac then Liam. He's about to spout a ridiculous excuse, Isaac can see it in his eyes and his sharp inhale of breath. So, he cuts Stiles off, going for the truth instead, "Kira's mom has been at the hospital in Beacon County. Scott had to drive there to pick her up."

Coach frowns. "Well. Okay. Yeah. I guess moms are important."

Isaac and Stiles share another look. Isaac shakes his head, glaring harshly and begging silently, *no dead mom jokes*.

Stiles huffs, grumbling under his breath, "You ruin all my fun."

—

Out on the field, the stadium lights are blaring and the stands are filling up. Isaac catches sight of Derek. He's sitting on the bleachers, looking out of place and a little uncomfortable, but when he spots Isaac, he smiles bright.

Isaac grins back.

Then, he jogs over to the rest of the team, sliding onto the bench next to Stiles and Liam. The latter's nerves haven't abated. Looking around in every direction, he mutters, "They're still not here."

Isaac's phone is radio silent, not a word from Scott or Kira. It's an alarming detail.

"Okay, what's really going on?" Stiles asks, trying to capture Liam's attention as he rifles through his equipment. "Are you nervous about the full moon? It's not for another twenty-four hours."

Liam turns his gaze, looking up at the eastern sky where the waxing gibbous is almost complete. The way he turns... it's almost like he forgot about the moon, like it isn't the cornerstone of his dismay or his desperate need for Scott. It makes Isaac's own anxiety double.

Stiles is observing Liam. Even without the help of chemosignals, he can sense the rising of his stress under the glow of the moon. “Liam, you’re gonna be fine,” Stiles says firmly. “Okay? Just try not to rage out on anyone.”

“You’re not worried?” Liam asks, jaw clenched and clearly not buying Stiles’ unaffected act.

“Okay, I’m mildly concerned,” Stiles admits. “*Mildly.*”

His pep talk leaves something to be desired.

Isaac watches Stiles pull his phone from his bag. He types rapidly, sparing quick glances at Liam every few seconds as he crafts a text for Scott. It reads: **How late you gonna be? Very worried. Very.**

Isaac can’t contain his laughter.

Immediately, Stiles’ eyes are on him. Lit up in distress, he hisses, “*Shut up!*”

Isaac laughs a little harder as Stiles races to lock his phone, fumbling in his haste to hide the message. His phone slides through his hands, nearly falling into the grass. Isaac reaches out to grab it, catching the device in an impressive display of quick reflexes.

Isaac holds the phone out to Stiles, just on the wrong side of smug.

“We’re going to lose without them,” Liam says, interrupting the exchange.

“No, we’re not,” Stiles says, poking Liam in the chest. “We can be just as good without Scott.”

Liam’s not convinced. He looks at Stiles, eyebrows furrowed and forehead wrinkling in his doubt.

Stiles elbows Isaac in the gut, forcing a startled grunt from his lips. Stiles presses in again, lighter the second time. He’s urging Isaac to back him up, to help.

So, Isaac leans forward, enough to make direct contact with Liam without Stiles in between. He says, with a hint of humor, “As long as you don’t pass the ball to Stiles... we might have a chance.”

Liam smiles softly, but it’s overshadowed by Stiles’ offended, “Hey! I’ve been practicing! And let me tell you something: I’m getting good.

Really good.”

Isaac rolls his eyes, “You’ve been practicing with me, dipshit. And let me tell you something: you still suck. Just *mildly* less.”

Stiles’ lips turn down at the corners as he wiggles his head in a gesture of mocking. Isaac only smirks.

The game begins, and, as expected, Stiles still sucks.

They’re down zero to four when the referee’s whistle blows, signaling the end of the first quarter. They haven’t scored a single point. It’s a testament to Scott’s abilities as a captain and a leader. He might not be their *best* player, but he is their most important. Without Scott, the team is distracted and disorganized.

Isaac is distracted and disorganized. He’s playing almost as bad as Stiles is.

And, now, they’re through the first quarter and there’s still no sign of Scott and Kira. They’re not just late. They’re missing.

Back on the bench, Stiles tells Liam, “All right, neither of them are answering. Isaac and I gotta go see what’s going on.”

“You’re *both* leaving?” Liam asks. He sounds scared.

Isaac and Stiles don’t really *have* to go together. Stiles could probably handle it on his own, but Isaac’s anxiety is ramping up. He’s been playing pretend for days. He can’t do it anymore. He can’t keep acting like he isn’t terrified, he can’t keep acting like they don’t all know something’s coming. Something worse.

“Liam, you’re gonna be fine,” Stiles says.

Liam doesn’t disagree, but he doesn’t agree either. Instead, he asks, “What are you going to tell Coach?”

Stiles looks out towards the field. Coach is slamming down his clipboard, throwing a tantrum and shouting nonsensically.

“Uh, you don’t tell him anything,” Stiles says, clapping a hand on Liam’s shoulder. Then, he disperses, searching for his dad and Malia in the stands.

Isaac hangs back, not yet ready to leave Liam. (Scott wouldn't leave yet. Not until he was sure Liam was stable.) Isaac aims for reassurance, "You're not gonna be alone. Malia is staying here in case Scott and Kira show up. And Brett's on the other team."

Liam's expression turns grumpy, voice slipping into an almost growl, "Brett's an asshole."

Isaac chuckles, "Maybe. But he's good in a fight."

Liam's frown deepens, like he knows Isaac is right, but doesn't want to admit it.

Isaac doesn't make him, only says, "Just try not to kill him, and maybe, you know, score? At least once? Might wipe the smirk off his face."

"Yeah, okay," Liam nods. He doesn't smile, but he does stop frowning.

Isaac finds Derek in the bleachers, calling him down and filling him in. Then, Isaac joins Stiles in the locker room to change out of their lacrosse gear. They move as quickly as possible, tearing off jerseys and pads without care or caution. As soon as they're dressed, they rush out into the hallway where Derek and Sheriff Stilinski are waiting.

"Where do we check first?" Stilinski asks.

"Kira's house. Scott was supposed to take her there before the game," Isaac says.

"And if they're not there?" Derek questions.

Instinctively, Isaac turns to Stiles, and he's not the only one. They're all angled more towards him, trusting in his judgment and decision making.

Stiles' eyes widen, floundering, "Uh. Then... Then we figure it out."

It's not a plan and it's not comforting, but it's the best they've got. If Scott and Kira aren't at the Yukimura household, then they could be anywhere between Beacon *Hills* and Beacon *County*. They can't prepare for what's next. They can only cross that bridge when they get there.

So, the four of them branch off towards their destination. Stiles and

his dad take one car while Derek and Isaac return to Derek's. The Stilinskis lead the way, zipping down side streets and forcing tight corners. Derek follows close behind, headlights dimmed down to unblinding levels.

Derek and Isaac don't say a word. The car is enclosed in a bubble of anxiety and neither is ready to pop it. They stay hushed and tense, thoughts and fears racing as quickly as the cars.

When they pull up outside Kira's house, the first thing Isaac notices is Scott's motorcycle. It's parked neatly in the driveway, squared away and set in place. It's the only neat thing in sight.

The house is in shambles.

Broken glass crunches under their shoes as they walk slowly closer. The large window at the front of the home is shattered, nearly blown out entirely, like someone – or something – had run through it.

Stilinski takes the first step inside and the rest follow. Here, it's worse. Shards of glass are sprinkled far past the entryway, decorating the floor like a mirrorball. And it's not just that. There's a floor lamp taking its name too literally, tipped over and plug dangling from the wall as the lightbulb flickers weakly. There's books splayed open, pages whispering in the breeze from the broken window. There's a vase chipped in flecks of green and dots of red. There's dust, dirt, and blood.

The place is destroyed, marked in chaos.

And there's a scent. It's familiar, something between life and death. Something that makes Isaac's heart skip a beat. Not because of the thing itself, but because of what comes along with it. Because of *who* comes along with it.

Stiles' phone rings. He answers it, "Hey–"

"Scott's been taken," Lydia's voice cuts through.

"Yeah, Scott and Kira. We just don't know where," Stiles says, eyes still darting around the foyer, drinking in the destruction.

"Mexico." It's Deaton. *"And if you want to save his life, that's where you're going too."*

Something worse has arrived.

Deaton and Lydia don't have anything else to say. At least, not really. There's a brief explanation of Eichen House and Deaton's search for Derek's cure turning into a search for Scott instead. Isaac is hardly listening. He's gone blank, resigned to the havoc, numb to the uncertainty.

Stiles pockets his phone. Then, "Dad?"

"Well," Stilinski sighs. "There's not much we can do tonight, but we'll start first thing tomorrow morning." And, with conviction, "We *will* find them."

The group splits off once more, stepping out of the scattered evidence and towards their separate cars. As Isaac and Stiles stand mere inches from their respective passenger doors, their eyes lock. In an instant, Isaac knows: they aren't operating inside the law for this one.

The eye contact breaks, and Isaac gets in the car.

As expected, as soon as they diverge towards their individual homes, Isaac's phone lights with a text from Stiles: **Gonna try to convince my dad not to follow protocol, but if it doesn't work we'll do this without him. We have to save them.**

—

When they get back to the loft, Isaac stops in the doorway. He feels out of sorts, tired and in limbo.

Derek takes pause, placing a gentle hand on Isaac's shoulder. "Scott's going to be okay," he says, squeezing. "He's gotten through worse."

Isaac doesn't say anything. They know this is Kate's doing. There's no doubt, there's no question. It was the berserkers Isaac smelled, and they're under her control. She's taken Scott to Mexico, same as she did with Derek.

Except, they got lucky with Derek. They found him. They saved him.

Isaac's not so sure they can do it again.

Derek keeps holding Isaac's shoulder, holding him in place. It's not a fierce grip, it remains lax and grounding. Eventually, he says, "Kate doesn't understand pack. She underestimates the connection. It's cost her before, and it's going to cost her again."

Pack.

Derek is the one who bit Isaac, but that's not what makes them pack. Pack is a choice. It's a dedication, a commitment. Derek didn't just bite Isaac, he took his pain and he didn't stop. The power in Isaac's veins is the same power that used to run through Derek. It's the former alpha spark that colored his eyes red and allowed him to turn Isaac in the first place. They're intrinsically tied.

They chose each other. And then, they chose Scott too.

To be pack is to live and die and fight for each other. To be pack is to choose someone again and again.

Kate doesn't have a pack. There is *no one* she would sacrifice for. She will never choose anyone but herself, and that makes her weak.

"We have to save them," Isaac says.

"We will," Derek answers.

Isaac reaches up, pressing his palm to Derek's hand where it's still placed on his shoulder. Isaac looks at Derek. There's something vulnerable about standing so close and so open in their affection. It's reflected in Derek's eyes, an unbounded adoration.

"Get some sleep, Isaac," Derek says.

"Okay," Isaac nods.

But, when he climbs up the stairs and into bed, sleep doesn't take him. He tosses and turns. It's hours of back and forth and back and forth. He's exhausted and desperate for rest, but he can't relax. He can't let go. He can't dream.

Maybe it's the anxiety. Maybe it's the lack of phone call from Scott. Maybe it's nothing but coincidence. Still, Isaac can't sleep.

Smoke and Mirrors

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 4 episode 12

Word count: 11,751

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Isaac wakes to the sound of his phone ringing. He feels like he's only just drifted off, and, now, he's being ripped out of the comfort of rest. He grumbles his annoyance, rolling over and nuzzling back into his pillow.

He ignores the phone, letting it ring itself into silence and intending to slip back to sleep.

The phone rings again.

Isaac groans. He turns back over, blindly reaching for his phone on the bedside table. His fingers graze the edge of his case, stretching out to slide the phone closer and... it clatters to the floor. Isaac groans a little louder.

He forces his eyes open and leans over the side of his bed in search of the incessant ringing. His phone has somehow managed to crawl its way to the far wall, haphazardly propped against it and blaring all the while.

A growl vibrates in the back of Isaac's throat.

Isaac pulls himself out of bed, having to practically lie down on the floor. And then, just as he gets the phone in his hand, the call stops. Isaac breathes a soft sigh of relief, beginning to drag his phone back towards himself.

It starts ringing. *Again.* Isaac jumps in surprise, movement slamming his arm roughly against his bed frame. This time, his groan comes in the form of a cursed, "*Fuck.*"

Finally, Isaac frees his arm and phone from the void under his bed, flipping the screen to reveal the name of the persistent caller. Isaac

rolls his eyes. Of course.

“Stiles,” he answers, voice still a little groggy from sleep.

The same can't be said for Stiles. He's animated in his exasperation, *“Jesus, could it have taken you any longer to answer? You do remember that Scott and Kira are missing right?”*

If Isaac's honest, in the lull of sleep, he had forgotten. Now, though, it hits him like a ton of bricks. His frustration fades, replaced by a flutter of anxiety. “Shit, I'm sorry,” Isaac says. “What's going on?”

Stiles sighs, dropping his irritation too. *“I couldn't convince my dad to dodge protocol.”* He sounds disappointed, but not surprised. *“So, we'll have to go ahead without him.”*

“What's our plan?” Isaac asks.

“We gather our troops and head to Mexico I guess,” Stiles says.

“Are we just assuming they were taken to La Iglesia?” Isaac asks. “I mean, maybe we should track them by scent too, just in case. We don't want to repeat our mistake of blindly following the Calavera's bullet trail.”

“Hey, that all worked out! We found Derek!” Stiles exclaims, like he's taken personal offense to the statement.

“Yeah, as a *teenager*,” Isaac stresses. Then, less combative and a little mumbled, “I just think we should be prepared.”

“Yeah, okay, all right. I'll get something of Scott's and send Lydia to get something from Kira. I still think we should go to La Iglesia first, but we'll be ready for anything,” Stiles says, easily jumping on board with the idea.

“Okay, good, good,” Isaac says. He's pacing his room nervously, adrenaline starting to build.

“I'll see you soon. Okay?” Stiles says. He doesn't hang up, waiting for Isaac's confirmation.

Isaac gives it. “Okay.”

Then, the call ends. Isaac starts getting ready to leave, going through the tedious but necessary tasks of brushing his teeth, washing his face, and getting dressed. He jams his feet into his shoes and throws a light

jacket over his t-shirt. He's tucking his phone into his jeans, just about ready to head downstairs, when a glint of light catches his eye.

There, on his bedside table, sits Allison's ring dagger. In a moment of pure instinct, Isaac grabs the twin knives, shoving them in his jacket pockets. They fit perfectly.

Isaac doesn't know why he's bringing the daggers. Sure, he's begun to improve, achieving a level of slightly fumbling sufficiency, but, still, he doubts he'll use them. He doubts he'll actually reach for them in the fight to come.

Regardless, now that he's picked them up, Isaac can't put them back. It was an impulse decision, but the balanced weight in his pockets is a grounding sort of comfort. It hangs on his shoulders, not heavy or burdensome, just an assuring presence.

Allison is with him. She won't let Scott die.

Isaac rounds the spiral staircase, stepping down into a thick layer of tension. Derek and Braeden are standing exceptionally close. Derek's hands are on Braeden's jaw and hers are on Derek's hips.

He definitely just interrupted an intimate moment. Oh well.

Isaac's too ramped up to feel sorry. He's caught in his own anxiety, tangled in a web of worries and what ifs. Scott was supposed to return to Beacon Hills at least an hour before yesterday's game and he's still not back. It's been too long. Too much could have gone wrong by now.

Isaac forces those thoughts from his mind and quickly turns his eyes away from Derek and Braeden. They've taken a step back at Isaac's arrival, but he still doesn't want to look. He might not be sorry for coming downstairs at a bad time, but he still doesn't want to encroach on their vulnerability.

Isaac's eyes land on the pile of weapons on the table. They all look pretty lethal.

"That's a lot of guns," he says, mostly just to fill the silence.

"To be honest, I don't even know if this is enough firepower to take down one berserker," Derek says, a light sigh to his voice. He sounds a

little hopeless.

For a brief second, Isaac locks eyes with Derek. But, before Isaac can see the extent of his despair, his attention is pulled elsewhere.

The loft door slides open, and in comes Peter Hale in all his infuriating glory.

“Not even close,” Peter stresses each syllable, tittering like this is amusing, like there aren’t lives on the line. “Killing a berserker is next to impossible. It’s not just the firepower, it’s breaking the animal spirit from the human.”

Peter strides right into the loft, strutting to the table as if he owns the place. Isaac hasn’t seen Peter since before his involvement with the dead pool was revealed. In fact, that last time Isaac saw Peter, he was viciously murdering The Mute in an act of cold fury.

Though, with what he knows now, Isaac thinks maybe it was cold calculation. Maybe Peter knew that if they took The Mute into questioning, it was only a matter of time before The Benefactor’s identity came to light. Maybe the murder was just a way to delay the inevitable. Maybe he was stalling.

Either way, the vision of bloodshed still makes Isaac’s skin crawl, still makes him wary of having Peter so close.

“Well, the one person we know with that kind of experience is Argent,” Derek says. “And he’s not getting back to me.”

Derek looks at Peter, and it’s not accusatory, but it’s close. Still, Peter’s expression doesn’t change. He doesn’t show any signs of recognition, ignoring Derek’s weighted gaze completely.

“Well, then you’re going to need help,” Peter says, moving closer. “Like Malia, maybe Liam. *Definitely* me.”

Isaac doesn’t trust Peter. He doesn’t trust his intentions, doesn’t trust him to offer help selflessly. He doesn’t trust Peter and he doesn’t want to rely on him, but he might not have a say. Peter is the only one who knows anything about the berserkers. He has all the information, and he won’t hand it over unless they let him in. They have to let Peter come close, they have to make themselves vulnerable to him. They don’t have a choice.

Peter can’t be trusted. But, if they want to save Scott and Kira, they

need him.

It's a horribly helpless feeling.

—

Isaac's phone rings for the fourth time that morning. Again, it's Stiles. This time, Isaac answers before the first ring has even played out, "Hello?"

"Hey. So, I have an idea, but I might need some help executing it?"

Isaac glances up at the group around him. Whatever Stiles' idea is, Isaac trusts Derek and Braeden with it. His trust in Derek is more obvious, more strong, more tested. But that doesn't negate the faith Isaac has in Braeden.

Isaac might not have known Braeden for very long, but he trusts her. The way she cares about Derek is so raw. She couldn't fake that, and she wouldn't want to. At first, Braeden can come across as callous – she certainly won't hold back in a fight – but she's not manipulative. She's true in her intentions, exposing them without much hesitation. It comes from a place of great security within herself. It's an admirable trait.

Peter is nothing like Braeden. He keeps his intentions held close to his chest. He presents himself in ego and indifference, but, underneath, he's insecure. Underneath, he's reckless in his fear and desperation to hold onto any power he can get his hands on.

Braeden embraces weakness, turning it to strength. Peter squanders strength, crushing it down to weakness.

Isaac doesn't trust Peter with Stiles' plan, but he swallows his doubts. Now isn't the time for moral reflections or introspection. It's a time for action.

So, Isaac puts his phone on speaker, placing it on the metal table between them.

"Okay, Stiles, you're on speaker with Derek, Braeden, and Peter," Isaac says. The final name brings a trace of animosity to his voice, but Isaac doesn't think anyone notices.

"Yeah, so, behave yourself," Derek snarks, bringing a hint of normalcy to the heavy foreboding that's taken over. Isaac lets himself smile for

just a moment.

“Okay, well, um,” Stiles starts in on a characteristic ramble. “Basically, Liam really wants to come with us, and I think we could use his strength, but the full moon is tonight and he hasn’t learned control yet, so–” Stiles pauses to take a breath. *“I was trying to think of a way to actually get him to Mexico, and I remembered that time in sophomore year when we chained Jackson up in a prison van...”*

Stiles trails off. He doesn’t have to say anything more, his implication is clear enough.

“But Jackson broke out and you ended up with a restraining order,” Isaac says. He’s not trying to be pessimistic. He’s trying to be realistic.

“Well, yeah, but Jackson was a kanima and it still took him hours to break free. We only need to get Liam to La Iglesia,” Stiles argues, though he’s not angry, just determined.

It’s still a significant risk – they all know that – but they have to try. They have to take the risk. Even if it does involve an untrustworthy Peter and an out of control Liam. They have to explore every avenue, they have to exhaust all their options.

“So, what? We need to steal a prison van?” Isaac asks. He looks around the table, searching for suggestions.

Braeden, with a great deal of confidence, says, “I can make that happen.”

With a tentative plan in place, the phone call comes to a quick close and Braeden gets ready to head out. There’s no sappy goodbye between her and Derek, but Isaac does catch them sharing in a heated look. Once again, he pulls his eyes away.

They fall on Peter. He’s just standing there, observing Derek and Braeden without a care for his intrusion.

Then, unexpectedly, Peter turns and meets his eye. Isaac doesn’t know what he did to garner Peter’s attention, maybe he could feel his gaze or sense his mistrust. Isaac doesn’t know. He just knows that Peter is staring at him, and he doesn’t like it. There’s a glint in his eyes, a shimmer of feeling that Isaac can’t place.

That’s what Isaac doesn’t like – about the expression and about Peter. He’s too hard to read. They never know what they’re going to get from

him. He's unpredictable, and, with all that's at stake, the unknown isn't just a risk, it's a threat.

Regardless, Isaac holds eye contact and keeps his own expression as neutral as possible.

Then, Braeden makes her leave, and the moment breaks.

Derek glances between Isaac and Peter. Isaac wonders what he sees, wonders what he can pick up on without the guide of chemosignals and heartbeats. Isaac wonders how uncertain Derek must feel under his fake bravado.

Whatever he notices, Derek doesn't comment on. He just says, "Come on, Isaac. You need to eat something before we leave."

Peter tuts, condescending. He slides into an almost southern drawl, "Aren't you two just the sweetest?"

Isaac grits his teeth. And, only marginally joking, he says, "I think we need to change the alarm code."

—

It doesn't take long for the signal to come through. Isaac is just finishing scarfing down a hasty lunch when he gets the text from Stiles. It's a simple message, reading: **On our way.**

Isaac alerts Derek and Peter, and the three of them head down to the loft's parking garage.

The elevator is quiet and awkward, but the car ride to meet the others is even worse. It's less than a two minute drive, just a quick loop around the corner to the empty side of the garage, but it's made uncomfortable by Isaac's mistake. He's a creature of habit, not even thinking about it when he plops down in the passenger seat of Derek's car. But then, Peter gets in the backseat with an indignant huff. Isaac realizes his blunder, squirming in bitter regret and warm embarrassment.

Except, when Isaac looks at Derek, he finds him with a pleased smirk on his face. It isn't necessary, but it is nice to be reminded of the dynamics at play here. Peter might be Derek's blood, but *Isaac* is his family. He gets to ride shotgun.

So, he does. They drive around the corner in stifled silence and Isaac

isn't bothered in the slightest.

When they pull into the garage, Stiles' Jeep is already parked and a van is entering from the opposite side. The three vehicles meet in a lopsided triangle, passengers exiting to reconvene in the center.

"How did you get a prison transport van?" Stiles asks.

Braeden walks up to him, nearly scoffing, "I'm a U.S. Marshal."

"Yeah, I just thought that was just a cover," Stiles says, brows knitted together and words dragging up like an almost question.

Braeden doesn't say anything, just keeps smiling at Stiles. It's a little disingenuous, but it's not mean. Braeden has an air of mystery around her. She's clear cut in her intentions, but she also doesn't give much of herself away. Surprisingly, that doesn't make Isaac trust her any less. Because she's not being secretive, she just has her guard up. Isaac respects that. He respects *her*.

Derek interrupts the stillness, gesturing towards Liam, "Are we really bringing him?"

Stiles' eyes flick to Liam. He wavers, like he's having second thoughts, but they're fleeting. He quickly solidifies again, standing his ground and pointing at Peter as he repeats, "Are we really bringing him?"

"We're bringing everyone that we can," Peter says, stepping forward with his usual patronizing tone. "And considering Scott and Kira were taken the night before a full moon, we should probably get going."

Peter's words carry a unique quality, a level of vagueness that seems intentional, like he's luring them to question. He's hinting at something, something only he knows, and he *wants* them to ask.

Malia does. "What's that mean?"

"If Kate took Scott back to the same temple that she took Derek, how do we know she's not planning to do the same thing to him?" Peter poses. It's not a question. It's a theory.

Isaac sweeps his gaze toward Stiles. He stands across from Peter, hands on his hips and mouth dropped open. Their eyes meet. It's a split second moment, just a brief connection, but it's enough. Doubt swims in Stiles' milky brown eyes, and the shared skepticism is enough to calm some of Isaac's nerves.

“What, she wants to make him younger?” Liam asks.

“Or take him back to when he wasn’t a werewolf,” Derek says. He’s looking down at his feet. Isaac knows he’s thinking about his own missing powers.

“A werewolf can’t *steal* a true alpha’s power,” Peter says. “But *maybe* a Nagual jaguar with the power of Tezcatlipoca behind her... maybe she can.”

It’s a decent hypothesis, a convincing one even, but there’s something not right. There’s something rehearsed in the words, something that doesn’t match up.

Scott doesn’t need to be a werewolf. Sure, if Kate strips him of his powers and immediately kills him, that definitely wouldn’t be great. But the first threat alone, simply the thought of Scott losing his powers, doesn’t seem so bad. Scott doesn’t *need* to be a werewolf. He didn’t even *want* to be one in the first place.

Scott was given powers, and he’s used them only to survive and to protect. Scott has used his powers for good, taking up a mantle of responsibility and a burden too much for one person to carry. He’s stepped into that role with grace, becoming an alpha through his determination, his willpower, his inability to stop trying.

To try is their greatest power. And, even if Scott wasn’t a werewolf, he would still try. He would still try to survive and protect. He wouldn’t – he *won’t* – give up until it kills him.

That’s what scares Isaac. Not the thought of Scott losing his powers, but his inability to surrender. Scott will go down fighting if he has to, and that terrifies Isaac.

“So, if everyone is sufficiently freaked out, I say we get going,” Peter says, indicating toward the cars.

“We can’t,” Stiles says. “Not without Lydia.”

In all the commotion, Isaac hadn’t yet noticed her absence. But, as soon as he does, he floods with concern. “Where is she?”

“She’s at the school,” Stiles says. He doesn’t elaborate. He’s being quieter than usual, and, though Isaac is loath to admit it, the lack of chatter is feeding his anxiety.

Lydia isn't human, but she's closer to it than any of the wolves. (Well, except for Derek, but that's a bit of a gray area.) Lydia is coming into her powers, really starting to embrace them. She's learning to control her abilities instead of allowing them to control her, but it's still new. She still doesn't quite have a grasp on it. Like Isaac and the ring daggers, it's one wrong move from slipping out of reach.

Lydia doesn't have much to offer in the realm of combat, but, these days, Isaac *sees* her more and more. He recognizes the potential stirring inside. She has a storm within her and, once she's ready to unleash it, she'll be a force of nature. She kind of already is, honestly. She might not be the best ally in a physical fight, but her mind is a weapon. She's a genius, if Isaac has ever met one.

Maybe that's why Stiles doesn't want to leave without her. Maybe he doesn't want to align with Peter without her. After all, Lydia has the greatest connection to him. Maybe she could see the fallacies that they can't.

Or, maybe, Stiles just loves Lydia – platonic or otherwise – and he refuses to leave her behind. He wouldn't leave any of them behind.

—

They've been waiting too long. Stiles keeps trying to get a hold of Lydia, but they're becoming antsy and unsettled.

"What's she doing at the school anyway?" Derek asks.

"We got Kira's sword," Malia says, holding it up, "but we need something with a stronger scent. Lydia went to get a jacket from her locker."

Lydia should be here by now. They've been waiting too long.

Stiles rejoins the group. Unanswered phone in hand, he says, "Nothing."

He's trying to hide his distress, but Isaac can see his tenacity going slack.

"If she has a car, she can catch up to us," Braeden says, not unkind but all out of patience. It's a suggestion of logic, one based in the desire to move out of this idle state. It's a collective feeling.

"That's a good point," Peter says, motioning towards Braeden. "We'll

call her from the road.”

“No. What if something happened? What if she’s in trouble?” Stiles asks, mostly rhetorical. He’s staying above his fear, keeping his tone light, letting only frustration seep through. He’s keeping his walls up to Peter, and Isaac commends his ability to do so.

Peter bites back without hesitation, “Fine. *You* stay, *you* find her. We’re gonna go on without you.”

Yeah, Isaac’s not doing that. If Stiles is waiting, so is he. He’s not leaving without Stiles.

Peter pulls his eyes in one quick lap around the group, then he turns and marches towards Derek’s car. He’s trying to close the discussion, trying to force their hand. It adds to Isaac’s unease, and, if the squint of his eyes is anything to go by, Stiles feels it too.

“I could call Mason,” Liam speaks up. “He has a study group at the school. Maybe he could look for her.”

They all turn to Stiles to make the final call. Isaac isn’t sure if it’s because of Stiles’ unexplainable link to Lydia or because he’s Scott’s right hand man and, thereby, second in command. Regardless, he has the authority, and, for some reason, they all know and respect it.

Stiles sighs, “All right. Fine.”

He clearly isn’t happy with the decision, but they’re on the clock and running out of time. It’s a tough decision, but it’s the right one.

The group gets ready to depart for their journey to Mexico. Derek and Stiles are both riding in the back of the prison van under the guise of having experience with out of control teen wolves. Isaac thinks maybe it’s more about avoiding excess time with Peter. Isaac doesn’t blame them, but he’s also not leaving two basically-humans in an enclosed space with an unanchored Liam. That’s not happening.

So, Braeden will drive the van and the four of them will ride in the back. That leaves Peter and Malia to take Derek’s car. Leaving them alone together is a little nerve wracking, but Isaac is choosing to trust Malia. He might not be able to trust Peter, but he *thinks* he can trust her. She seems to be on their side again, having found forgiveness and love for Stiles. (Though, Isaac’s not sure she ever lost her love in the first place.)

At the very least, Isaac *knows* he can trust Stiles, and Stiles trusts Malia. That will have to be enough.

Before they all load in, Peter has one more thing to say, “Remember what we’re dealing with here. It’s not just Kate, it’s berserkers. You might see human eyes behind those skulls. Do not assume that there is any humanity left.”

On Isaac’s right, there’s a rush of fear. It’s a strong scent, and it’s coming from Liam. Isaac isn’t the only one who notices.

“Oh,” Peter says. “This little one is terrified of them, aren’t you? Don’t worry, my friend. It is that fear that will keep you alive.”

Liam swallows.

Peter finishes with, “A reminder to everyone: you do not fight berserkers to survive,” he pauses for dramatic effect, “you fight to kill.”

—

When they’re gaining on La Iglesia and the sun is about an hour away from the meeting with the horizon, they chain Liam up. Isaac and Derek each take a pair of handcuffs to Liam’s wrists, Isaac on the left and Derek on the right.

Once Derek has his cuffs secure, he asks, “All good?”

Liam looks up from his wrists. Then, he pulls hard. The chains rattle against the metal bar of the bench, but they don’t give.

“Okay,” Derek murmurs. He reaches into the inside pocket of his jacket. “I brought something to help you.” Derek holds a disc in his hand, wood carved in a familiar looping symbol. It’s the triskelion. It’s the same one Kate was after, the same one revealed to be fake. Derek’s words directly contradict that, “This has been with my family for centuries. It’s a very powerful supernatural talisman. We use it to teach betas how to control themselves on a full moon.”

Derek passes the triskelion over to Liam. He holds it in his chained hand, tracing over the symbol with curious wonder.

Isaac meets Stiles’ eyes over Derek’s hunched back. He has to bite his lip to keep from laughing. Derek helps with the effort, digging an elbow into Isaac’s side without even looking at him. Instead, Derek is

looking at Stiles. Stiles' expression is blatantly unimpressed, eyes narrowed and brows pulled in.

Derek tips his head, and Isaac knows, even without seeing his face, that he's urging Stiles to support his claim. (Isaac ignores the eerie similarities to the night before, to Stiles' own terrible pep talk and his elbow in Isaac's side.)

Stiles gets with the program, coming to Derek's aid with a fumbled, "Yes, it's powerful." He clears his throat, "Very powerful."

Liam is staring up at them. He looks so young and scared. Isaac wants to comfort him, wants to offer reassurance or guidance, but he doesn't know how. So, he says nothing.

—

As the moon rises in the sky, the world becomes darker and Liam's control dwindles away.

Isaac feels the pull of the moon, but it doesn't rock him. Not like it used to. Isaac is stable in his power, in his anchor, in his fear. Isaac has accepted that fear isn't a weakness, but a part of life. He can't escape fear, but he can overcome it. And that's what he does. He's scared for Scott, for Kira, for Derek, for Lydia. But, like the moon, he rises above it.

Liam's not quite there yet. He jerks against his restraints, triskelion held in a clawed hand. "Whatever you were gonna teach me..." Liam's eyes glow gold, "I think you better start."

Liam is dripping with sweat, his upper body is lurching with every breath, and his heart is racing. He's just on the edge of humanity, and he's about to lose his grip.

"Liam, you with me?" Derek asks. He waits until Liam makes eye contact, then explains, "We have a mantra that we use. You repeat it, you focus on the words. It's like meditating." Liam looks away, gaze drifting to Stiles, but Derek keeps going, "You say the words until you feel control coming back to you."

"Okay," Liam bites out. He pulls the chains again. "Okay, okay! What are the words?"

"Look at the triskelion. See the symbol?" Derek asks. Liam holds the talisman in his palm, looking down at the interconnected spirals. "I

have a tattoo on my back, it's the same thing. Each spiral means something."

Isaac remembers Boyd and the train car and the symbol on the box. That was the first time Isaac saw the triskele, the first time he learned, "Alpha, beta, omega."

"It represents the idea that we can always rise to one and fall back to another," Derek says. "Betas can become alphas."

Isaac thinks of Scott doing the impossible. He thinks of Scott burning through a ring of mountain ash with only his force of will. He thinks of gold eyes turning red.

"Alphas can become betas," Stiles adds.

Isaac thinks of Derek pulling him back from the brink of death. He thinks of Derek's alpha spark entering his bloodstream. He thinks of red eyes turning blue.

"Can alphas become omegas?" Liam asks, voice still rough.

Isaac thinks of Derek, fallen from alpha to beta, but not quite omega. He thinks of Derek dwindling on the edge of Scott's pack, but staying firm in his connection to Isaac. Isaac thinks of Derek, and doesn't see his loss of alpha power as a fall from grace. He sees Derek growing past the power hungry anger, and stepping into himself in all the ways he never could before.

"All you have to do is say the three words. And with each one, you tell yourself you're getting calmer, more in control."

Liam is gripping the triskelion hard with eyes unfocused. Derek draws his attention forward, "Go ahead."

Liam spits out the words, "Alpha, beta--"

"Slower," Derek cuts him off.

Liam breathes a little deeper. "Alpha... beta... omega..." The words are spoken through gritted teeth, anger present in every syllable. Liam groans like he's in pain. "Alpha... beta... omega..."

"Good. Say it again," Derek says. He's calm and patient with Liam. It doesn't make Isaac jealous, it only makes him proud. "Remember, every time you say the words, you're getting calmer."

Liam rolls his neck. This time, his voice comes out imbued with power, resonating in his chest, "Alpha... beta... omega..."

"Whoa," Stiles mumbles, barely audible, but it reaches Isaac's ears nonetheless. He sees Stiles squirming back along the bench, pulling his feet up from the floor and his knees to his chest.

"Say it again," Derek says, completely ignoring Stiles. He's staying fully focused on Liam.

"Derek, I don't think that, uh, the powerful talisman of self-control is working," Stiles says, and he definitely has a point. Liam is growing stronger in his rage, eyes shining with gold and teeth turning sharp.

"Liam, say it again," Derek urges, volume raising, but it doesn't have the desired effect.

Liam strains up from the bench, growl building in his throat as he tries to lunge toward Derek. Isaac, on instinct, sticks an arm out in front of Derek, as if that's going to do anything. It doesn't, but Liam's movement does. He rocks forward with such force that the van tips to the side, sending Stiles further into the corner and pressing Isaac's arm against Derek's chest. He nearly takes the car off the road.

"Liam!" Isaac doesn't know which one of them shouts it, maybe all three.

Liam continues to jerk in his restraints, yanking as hard as he can, trying to break out and kill them. Isaac wants to do something, wants to help, but he's a little busy crashing into Derek as the car swerves in every direction.

"Derek?" Braeden calls back, trying to control the vehicle, but not having much luck against Liam.

Just then, Liam charges forward in a particularly rough pull. He snaps his left handcuff clean in half. He gets an arm unchained, meaning five claws have been set free.

"I think we're gonna need to go a little faster!" Stiles yells to Braeden.

Liam tugs against the last remaining cuff, reaching out as far as he can. He's reaching out for Derek, claws coming close to his throat. Derek tries to deflect Liam's attacks, but he can't match his strength, not when he's basically human.

Isaac doesn't want to hurt Liam, but he doesn't want to watch him kill Derek either. So, giving way to the pull of the moon just slightly, Isaac grabs Liam's wrist. He uses his grip and his power to twist Liam's arm, not enough to break, but enough to hurt. Then, when Liam grumbles and whines in pain, focused less on bloodshed and more on breaking Isaac's hold, Derek shoves him hard in the chest.

Liam falls back, hitting the right side wall of the van and knocking them a little further off course.

Liam is deterred, but only for a moment. Almost immediately, he surges forward again, anger seeming to be focused on Derek alone. Though, that probably has to do with the way he keeps trying to teach Liam. Even through the threat of claws, Derek says, "Keep focus!"

Derek is still fighting Liam off and Isaac is still trying to help. The issue is: Isaac doesn't want to help *too* much. He really, really doesn't want to hurt Liam. And, while Isaac has control in the traditional sense, with the way the van keeps tipping, he doesn't have precision. In these conditions, Isaac doesn't know exactly where his blows are going to land or how much strength is going to be enacted. He can't properly detain Liam with that knowledge. He's holding back, too scared of making a deadly mistake.

"Derek, I don't think 'alpha, beta, omega' is resonating with him," Stiles says, like that wasn't already obvious.

"Do you know any other mantras?" Derek counters.

"Yeah, I do," Stiles says, epiphany blossoming. "Liam!" Stiles carelessly leans forward, trying to catch the eye of a raging out werewolf. "Liam, what three things cannot long be hidden?"

Liam pauses, but the delay doesn't stick. He quickly lashes out again, almost annoyed by the disruption. Stiles starts trying to push Liam away from Derek, but it's less about helping and more about worming his way into view. He commands, "Liam, look at me! What three things cannot long be hidden? What three things?"

Liam hesitates. He's still got an arm held out against Derek's throat, but he grunts out, "The sun... the moon..." Liam's eyes stop glowing, "the truth."

"That's it. Say it again," Stiles orders.

Liam does, forcibly pulling his hand away as he heaves, "The sun...

the moon... the truth..."

"Derek?" Braeden asks.

Derek looks at Isaac, then up at Braeden. He exhales, almost shocked by it, "We're okay."

Liam's body calms and the van stops swaying. They're back on track. They're okay.

"The sun... the moon... the truth..."

—

When they arrive outside La Iglesia, Liam is still coated in a thin sheen of sweat, but he's calm in his control. He pants, smile breaking through, "I can't believe I did it."

Honestly, Isaac can't believe it either. Liam was getting dangerously close to killing Derek or Stiles, and Isaac was getting dangerously close to intervening in a more effective way. If Liam had drawn blood, if he had done any real harm, Isaac would have stopped him. Even if it meant hurting him. Isaac doesn't know whether he should feel guilty about that or not.

"For a minute there, I thought I was gonna tear the three of you apart," Liam says, still chuckling lightly.

They stare at him.

Stiles nods, speaking wryly, "Yeah. That would've made for an awkward ride home. So, thanks."

It's not funny and it doesn't make anyone laugh, but it does diffuse some of the tension.

"Think you can bring the same level of control and strength inside La Iglesia?" Derek asks, inspecting.

Liam doesn't answer verbally. Instead, he brings a hand out in front of him. Then, he flicks his claws through his fingertips. It's a marked improvement. It's progress.

"All right," Stiles says, impressed. "We might actually be able to do this."

Stiles glances over at Derek and Isaac on his left, almost like he's

looking for their agreement. Isaac gives him a small nod. The stakes are still high and the terrain ahead is rocky, but, with Liam in control, things just got a little bit easier. They might actually be able to survive this. They might actually be able to save Scott and Kira.

Derek dips his head in a curt nod of his own. He stands, moving to the back of the prison van. He opens one of the doors. A smell hits Isaac's nose. He can't see the creature, but he recognizes it instantly. It's a berserker.

And then, out of nowhere, Derek's body is pulled from the van, disappearing out of Isaac's sight and into the desert.

There's no time to think or act or prepare, there's just the sound of rumbling snarls and Derek's grunts of pain. Isaac doesn't have a chance to react. He's not frozen, he's not numb, he's not paralyzed. He can move, he just doesn't. He doesn't have the time.

All at once, Derek is torn out of the van and then out of Isaac's life.

There's no time. There's just the sound of Derek's body slamming against rock. There's just his cries of agony. There's just an armored fist pounding on bare chest. There's just razor-sharp claws piercing skin. There's just the smell of blood, mixing with life and with death.

There's no time.

Then, there's gunshots. Isaac counts eleven of them. He doesn't know why he's counting.

There's gunshots, and then quiet. The van doors open all the way and the berserker enters Isaac's field of vision, but it's retreating. The fight is already over. Time is already up.

Isaac sees Derek, and, finally, he reacts. Derek's name is on his lips, but it's not a shout. He doesn't have the clarity for volume, too shocked and uncertain. It's a muted breath of, "*Derek.*" It's just his mouth forming over the word, remembering how it tastes on his tongue. And then, Isaac runs.

He leaps out of the van, pushing past the others. They skid to startled stops, but Isaac keeps going. He runs right towards Derek, reaching him at the very last second. Isaac just barely gets a hold of him, just barely manages to slow Derek's descent to the ground as he crumbles.

Braeden is on Isaac's left, presence whispering in his peripherals, but

he hardly notices. Derek's chest and middle are clawed open. His shirt is torn to shreds, material sticking to his slashes. Red stains his skin and burns Isaac's nose on every inhale. Derek's breathing is staggered and rough, causing pained, guttural noises to catch in his throat.

There's blood at the corners of Derek's mouth.

Isaac blinks, and then there's an image of Allison seared into the back of his eyelids, blood and *I love you* painted on her lips.

"How bad is it?" Peter's voice pulls Isaac's eyes open. He's still kneeling at Derek's side, still holding his hands over the blood weeping from his wounds. It's bad. It's death.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Derek makes out, breathless and squirming against the pain. "Just – get to Scott."

Nobody moves. Isaac could, but he doesn't. He refuses. He's not going anywhere.

"Just find him," Derek is pleading and begging. There's emotion in his voice. "We'll be right behind you. Go."

Still, nobody moves.

"Go!" Derek shouts, desperate.

Isaac can hear footsteps fading away, but he doesn't move. He doesn't look away, he keeps watching Derek. He can't let him out of his line of sight. Not again.

There's one person still behind them, one person hesitating. Isaac doesn't have to look to know it's Stiles. He just knows.

"Hey, hey," Derek musters. "Save him."

Stiles goes, and then it's just the three of them. Just Isaac, Derek, and Braeden.

"Isaac..." Derek whispers.

"I'm not leaving you," Isaac says, just as hushed.

Derek gives a jerking nod, like he already knows, like that wasn't what he meant. His hand is lifting from his stomach, shaking and dripping with his own blood. He's reaching towards Isaac, the slightest movement.

Isaac grabs his hand. He presses it back down to Derek's stomach, but holds it in his own. He squeezes, "You're okay, Derek. You're going to be okay."

Isaac uses their hands to push against the gaping claw marks gouged in Derek's skin, like he's trying to force the blood back into his body.

Isaac blinks, and then he sees Boyd impaled on Derek's claws and bleeding out into a pool of water.

"Can you still pull a trigger?" It's Braeden speaking. She's level headed, compartmentalizing her emotions in a way Isaac has never been able to do.

"Yeah," Derek exhales.

"All right," Braeden whispers, putting a gun in Derek's hand. She makes pointed eye contact, speaking with conviction, "Stay with me. You're gonna be okay."

"It's a mortal wound, and, right now, I'm feeling pretty mortal," Derek winces, writhing in jagged, painful motions.

"We're not letting you die," Isaac says, trying to match Braeden's determination. Isaac can't lose Derek. He *can't*.

There's a growling in the distance. It's a berserker.

Braeden moves, leaving Derek's side and ducking into the cover of the Aztec ruins. Isaac hears her gun cock and hears the heavy footsteps of the berserker approaching, but he doesn't move. He's staying right where he is.

The gunshots start up again, and it's not just a berserker. It's Kate too. Braeden can't match them. She ends up in the berserker's hold.

"Isaac, help her," Derek mutters. "Go – Go help Braeden."

"I can't," Isaac cries. Even if he wanted to, he couldn't leave Derek. He can't do it. He just keeps grappling at his chest, keeps counting his heartbeats. He can't leave. "I'm not leaving. I'm not letting you die alone."

Derek doesn't fight him. He laughs weakly, head shaking, "Lydia was right."

Isaac's not listening. He's really crying now, tears pouring down his

cheeks. Lydia was wrong. Derek isn't dying. This is fine. They can fix this. Isaac can fix this.

He tightens his grip on Derek's hand. There's pain all around him. It's in his movements, in his breaths, in his eyes. And, now, it's slipping under Isaac's skin. He hardly notices the difference. He's already in agony, this is already the worst he's ever felt.

Derek is dying right before his eyes. Isaac is watching it happen. He has Derek right here with him. He's holding his hand and they're making contact and...

Isaac is going to get to say goodbye. But it doesn't matter. It doesn't change a thing.

This is torture. This isn't fair.

Derek is Isaac's family. He's his brother. Not by the bite, but by choice. They chose each other. They chose to fight together. They chose to protect each other.

Isaac has failed. He hasn't protected Derek. Derek's powers are gone and he's dying, and they should have been ready. Isaac had all the warning in the world, and he still did nothing.

There was time, and they wasted it. And, now, Derek is dying.

Isaac's family is being taken from him. Again.

"Isaac. Isaac, stop. You're – You're going to kill yourself," Derek is fighting to get the words out.

"No," Isaac whispers. Then, again, louder, "No. No. No."

He's still holding Derek's hand, he's still pulling in pain. He won't stop. He'll save Derek, just as Derek saved him. He'll push himself to his limit, and then go a little further. He'll make the sacrifice. It's his turn. It's his choice. It's his–

"Isaac, please." Derek's voice is so broken.

Isaac lets go. He's sobbing now, heaving with the strength of his emotion. This wasn't supposed to happen. Life was never supposed to be like this. Derek and Isaac were supposed to rebuild, they were supposed to carry on as a unit. Isaac was never supposed to live without Derek.

“Isaac,” Derek keeps saying his name. “Isaac. It’s okay.”

“Derek,” Isaac whimpers. He’s aware of the fight picking up around them, aware of tires screeching and guns firing, but he doesn’t care. All he cares about is Derek.

Isaac can’t face this. He can’t do this without Derek.

Derek is his anchor. He’s his family. He’s his home. Isaac can’t live without him. This isn’t supposed to happen. Isaac is being split in half. A part of him is dying and he can’t breathe under the crushing weight of this truth.

“Please...” Isaac mumbles. Then, just to say it, “Derek.”

“I’m sorry,” Derek says. The words are so soft, his energy is fading. Derek is fading.

Isaac grips his hand with all that he has, like he can pass his own heartbeat over to Derek. Giving, giving, giving.

Derek forces sound from his throat, “I... Isaac, I—”

“Derek, don’t,” Isaac begs. He knows what Derek is going to say, and he can’t hear it. He can’t say goodbye. “Please don’t say it.”

This is so much worse. Knowing that this is it, knowing what’s about to happen, and knowing what Derek’s about to say. It’s so much worse than having no goodbye at all.

Derek says it anyway. “I love you.”

Isaac doesn’t want to say it back. He doesn’t want to say goodbye. But he does. Because he has to. Because this is his one chance. This is his moment. There’s no time.

“I love – I love you too,” Isaac chokes through his sobs.

Faintly, just barely, Derek smiles. His heart stops.

“*Derek*,” Isaac’s lips shape the name. There’s no sound, just a release of the air left in his lungs. The last of the air breathed in before the final heartbeat.

Isaac pulls new air into his lungs, the first breath of *after*. The air is crisp and stark, but it sours his lungs. Darkness swells inside Isaac, every nook and cranny taken over and filled with *wrong*. Pressure

builds as it spreads. There's no room, there's no space. This pain is too big, this grief is too much.

It grows and grows until Isaac can't take it anymore.

And then, Isaac roars. The sound rips from his body. There's clarity in his volume. Derek is gone.

He's dead, and Isaac can feel it. He can feel it in his limbs, in his lungs, in his heart, in his soul. He can feel it everywhere. It's darkening him, it's swallowing him, it's destroying him.

The roar dies in Isaac's throat. The ground stops shaking. That's it. That's the final moment. There's nothing else.

Braeden runs over, but she's too late. Derek's gone. His eyes have fallen shut and his fingers have uncurled from Isaac's. He's gone.

"Derek?" Braeden cries, but there's no answer. There's nothing left. There's just Isaac, empty and demolished and holding Derek's limp hand. There's nothing. Time is up.

Derek is dead.

—

The fight goes quiet. The world goes still.

Isaac keeps clinging to that final moment. Derek is gone, the air has been purged from his lungs, but Isaac isn't letting go. He's staying there, kneeling at Derek's side as desert dust swirls in the wind.

Isaac is still holding Derek's hand.

He can move, but he doesn't want to. As soon as he lets go, the goodbye ends and the aftermath begins.

Isaac isn't ready, but the world doesn't care. The fight resurges.

Braeden grabs Isaac's arm, forcing him away from Derek. Isaac tries to pull back, tries to keep holding his hand, but he doesn't have a choice. Braeden gets Isaac to his feet, and that's it.

Isaac moves, and the moment is over. The goodbye is finished. He's in the aftermath now.

Isaac is dazed and distraught, caught between denial and reality. He's

a mess, incoherent and fumbling. It earns Isaac a scratch, harsh and digging in deep. Blood and pain bloom down his flank.

Pain makes you human.

Isaac centers. He has so much pain. He's never felt worse. He's never felt like this. The moon's pull has nothing on his agony. Isaac is in control. He's in anguish.

It's a berserker. The berserkers killed Derek.

Isaac is in fury.

He howls. His eyes glow gold. His fangs and claws slide into place. He attacks.

Isaac is lost to his suffering, pain taking over and pushing him forward. He fights back hard and strong and ruthless. Isaac has nothing. All he knows is pain, and he shares it. Giving, giving, giving. Clawing, clawing, clawing.

He slashes at the berserker's torso, trying to recreate the mortal wound that stole Derek from this earth, from Isaac's embrace.

Isaac can't see through his wrath. He just keeps going. It's all he can do. All he can do is keep moving. He has to move. He can't stop.

Isaac has already lost one brother. He's already gone through this before, and it ruined him. It broke Isaac down to nothing. It turned him into a victim.

Isaac doesn't want to be a victim anymore. He wants to feel powerful. He wants to feel control. He wants to protect himself.

Isaac has lost everyone. His mom, his brother, his father. Erica, Boyd, Allison. *Derek*.

It never ends. It never stops.

Isaac feels a weight in his pockets. It rests on his shoulders, it knocks against his hips as he maneuvers through the battlefield. It's a presence. It's a reassurance of *not alone*. Isaac leans into it.

He pulls out the Chinese ring daggers. Isaac spins the handles around his fingers, making two full rotations in a blur of metal motion. Then, he seizes. He grips the daggers firm. A spark of power zips from his fingertips, racing up his arms and down towards his sternum. He

comes alive a little more. His heartbeats turn steady, blood pumping from the place reserved for Allison Argent.

Isaac breathes in her memory. He remembers how she fought with grace and precision. Even in her darkest hours, she was never messy. He remembers two twin arrows where shoulders meet chest, he remembers two twin daggers cutting in his stomach and back. Even in her grief, she was focused. She was exact.

Isaac lets his fear fuel his courage. He balances himself in her smile.

Then, Isaac lunges. The daggers circle around and around, again and again, slicing skin and hitting armor.

All around him, the fighters are tiring and losing strength, but Isaac isn't. He finds motivation in his loss, equipping himself with anger and adrenaline. With the daggers in his grip, he taps into something deeper, efforts doubling.

Isaac doesn't stop. He keeps moving, turning fluid in his fight. Everything is wrong, everything hurts, but, at the same time, everything in Isaac aligns. His skill, his pain, his power. Everything is building to this moment.

He wields the ring daggers as if he has been doing so all his life. They become an extension of his wrists and hands and fingers. They twirl and score in tandem. He moves, and they move. Together, they fight to stay standing, to be the one left behind, to keep living for the dead.

Kate rounds on Isaac.

She stands in front of him. Her skin is tinted blue and spotted. Her eyes are as cold as ever.

She controls the berserkers. She killed Derek.

Isaac stops.

"Huh," Kate says, surveying him like he's something peculiar. "You know, I wasn't *planning* on killing you." She steps closer, smiling cruelly. "I just needed you out of the way. I needed *Derek* dead and I needed *you*... distracted." Her voice goes sickly sweet, "Because you're the only one who could have brought Scott back."

Scott.

Isaac got distracted – the worst thing you can be in a fight – and, now, Scott could be dead too.

The shadows inside grow impossibly bigger, the pressure of darkness pulses against his bones. Isaac growls, gripping warm metal hard enough his knuckles go white.

Kate laughs humorlessly, “Well, if you’re going to be this stubborn...”

Isaac stares her down. He’s not afraid. He has nothing left to lose. He’s already lost it all. He left his future in Derek’s hands. He left his light in Derek’s eyes. He left his hope kneeling at Derek’s side, left it to be blown away or buried beneath the sand. He has nothing left to give.

Kate can’t hurt him. She’s an agent of destruction, but Isaac is already destroyed. He has no limits. His grief is endless, spreading for miles in every direction. He has no stakes. He has nothing to hold onto and nothing to hold him back. He only has pain.

Kate hisses with pointed teeth and neon green eyes. She’s preparing to pounce, and Isaac is ready. For whatever the outcome, Isaac is ready. He’s ready to kill her and he’s ready to die.

Then, a wolf howls. Like, an *actual* wolf.

The gunshots cease. Everything stops. Isaac turns.

A black wolf jumps over blood splattered stones and crumbling rock. Kate growls and bares her fangs, but the wolf doesn’t run. Its eyes glow, gleaming a bright cerulean that only exists in the wings of a butterfly or the irises of a werewolf.

And, for the third time that night, “*Derek.*”

The wolf attacks. It leaps at Kate, sending her toppling to the ground. She screams and flails against the animal, but she can’t dislodge it.

Nobody moves. They only watch as canines sink into flesh. They only listen as Kate cries. They only smell the gush of warm blood. Nobody moves until the wolf lets Kate go.

She slithers on the ground, trying to drag her body away. She’s trying to escape, she’s trying to flee.

Isaac doesn’t care. He’s watching the wolf, watching the snarl and the blue, *blue* eyes. He’s watching as the wolf transforms. It stands,

growing taller and more human until the fur fades and all that's left is...

Derek.

He stands over Kate. His heart is beating and his lungs are breathing.

"You were..." Kate breathes in awe. "You were dead."

"No," Derek shakes his head with an almost smile. Like smug relief. "I was evolving," he says. "Something you'll never do."

A berserker growls.

The creature comes at Derek, but, this time, he's ready. He blocks the attack, knocking the berserker's clawed arm back to its side. Derek closes in, swift and faster than the berserker can keep up with. He grabs the animal skull armor. He holds it in both hands, grunting and prying with all his might. Cracks begin to form, shining with golden light that pours from within.

And then, all at once, the berserker turns to dust. It pours to the ground, mixing with the sand of the desert. Its existence marked only by the fallen chest piece and the empty animal skull left in Derek's grip.

Derek killed the berserker.

There's a gunshot. Only one.

Kate falls. She was trying to escape in the flurry of transformation and disintegration, but there was one person watching. One person who just so happens to be a perfect shot.

Argent. He's holding a gun in one hand, the other clutching over his injured stomach.

Kate looks up at her brother, a bullet in her arm and the desert floor beneath her. Breathless, she pants, "Ch-Chris?"

Isaac is seeing Argent for the first time since the night at the hospital, but not much has changed. He's still holding a gun on his sister and he's still waiting for a reason. Except, this time, he's not waiting for a reason to save her. He's waiting for a reason to shoot. Isaac can see it in his eyes. They're open wide, crisp blue glimmering with a special kind of heartache. It's a heartache Isaac is keenly familiar with. It's the

splintering ache of finally losing hope, of finally giving up on someone you were never supposed to lose faith in. It's the heartache of losing a family member, not to death, but to their own twisted being.

Despite his bleeding wound and the fracture of his heart, when Kate runs, Argent follows. He follows her deeper into the ruins of La Iglesia. He follows her out of sight, and, for a second, nothing happens. For a second, there's just stillness and silence.

And then, all at once, Derek is hugging Isaac. Isaac doesn't have to move. Derek comes to him, closing the distance between them and holding him tight. Unlike the skull, Derek doesn't pull Isaac apart. He uses his strength to push Isaac's pieces back together, to press him back into himself. He uses his strength to mend Isaac's cracks, to keep him whole, to anchor him.

"I hate you," Isaac whispers into Derek's neck. His heart stutters.

Derek laughs, small and tired, an exhale more than anything else. "You know I have werewolf hearing again, right? You can't lie to me."

Isaac doesn't say anything. There are no words to explain this feeling, none that can truly capture the two extremes: the splitting open and the stitching back together. There is nothing Isaac can say. But, in Derek's arms, the pain dims, and Isaac doesn't feel so empty anymore.

Derek is alive, and Isaac can feel it. He can feel it in his limbs, in his lungs, in his heart, in his soul. He can feel it everywhere. It's brightening him, it's reviving him, it's saving him.

—

The others run out of the temple. Stiles, Liam, Malia, Kira, and...

Scott.

He's okay. He's alive. He's here.

Scott runs right up to Isaac, sliding to a stop in front of him, kicking up a puff of orange dust. (Derek, who Isaac previously wasn't letting out of arm's reach, takes a step back. Isaac lets him.)

"Isaac," Scott breathes.

"Scott," Isaac echoes.

The air around them is charged with electricity, like a buzzing of

remission so sudden they can't quite feel it yet. They're standing on the cliffside, hearts racing and stomachs tightening with anticipation. This safety is a fragile thing and they're both a little scared to break it.

"Your howl," Scott whispers. He's breathless, eyes wild like he's still in the throes of the fight. "I heard your howl."

Isaac isn't surprised. He's pretty sure everyone heard his howl. Still, he explains, blunt as ever, "Derek went and got himself killed."

Scott doesn't show any signs of shock. Just says, "Well, we all do stupid things sometimes."

Isaac squints. "What did you do?"

"Went and got myself turned into a berserker," Scott says, at least having the decency to appear sheepish in his regret.

Because you're the only one who could have brought him back.

Realization creeps up Isaac's spine, slowly gaining on him, getting closer and closer to coming together.

"But Liam brought me back," Scott interrupts. The tickling of *why?* is swept away in the undercurrent of, "And your howl. I heard it... And Liam, he..."

"Saved you?" Isaac finishes.

Scott nods. He keeps staring at Isaac, not backing away or breaking the static. They're just taking each other in, observing the life inside. They're memorizing what it looks like to be safe.

Eventually, Scott asks, "Can I hug you?"

"Yes," Isaac agrees.

They're still fragile, still a little scared, but they reach out anyway. The first touch is tentative and gentle, but, when neither shatters, it turns firm. They embrace, drawing the other in close and memorizing what it *feels* like to be safe.

There's quiet noise all around them: car doors opening and closing, footsteps on crunching sand, hushed voices. Isaac doesn't hear any of it. He's tuned in to Scott's heart and lungs – both steady, if a little fast. Isaac is focused on the stabilizing thrum of life, the certainty of hope.

That is, until Derek asks, “Where’s Peter?”

Scott’s arms tighten around Isaac for a fraction of second, and then they’re gone. It leaves Isaac feeling cold and a little hollow.

“Scott?” Derek pushes. There’s something in his voice. Not quite a warning, but not far off.

And Scott... Scott stands right next to Isaac, perfectly still and silent. His heart speeds up and he swallows thickly, but he doesn’t speak, almost like he can’t.

To Isaac’s left, someone moves. Isaac suppresses a flinch, but only barely. He hasn’t come down yet. He’s still on that edge. Adrenaline is pulsing in his veins, turning him jittery and startled. But it’s only Stiles. There’s a relief in seeing him, in seeing up close that he’s okay. It doesn’t last.

“Peter was working with Kate. He was trying to become the alpha again.”

It doesn’t happen all at once. For a moment, the words linger in the air, gradually drifting into awareness and recognition. They wrap around Isaac’s neck like a noose, a garrote, a thermo-cut wire.

Isaac’s cold and relief fall out of existence, taken over by a white hot fury, a rage that *burns* through him. It starts in his throat and spreads like a wildfire with every inhale. Flames lap at his ribcage, turning his resolve to ash in a desperate plea to unleash, to let it free.

It’s not betrayal. It’s not broken trust. It’s only anger. It’s anger not for himself, but for Scott and for Derek. The kind of protective instinct that can’t be washed down or ignored.

Isaac doesn’t realize he’s moving until there are strong hands on his biceps and he’s thrashing against the hold. He thinks he’s shouting, thinks he can feel his vocal cords tearing, but he doesn’t care.

Isaac wants his blood. He wants it spilled, wants it under his nails, in his teeth. He wants revenge.

A hand moves to the back of his neck, squeezing like the words still choking him, still killing him, still decimating him.

“Isaac!”

He crashes to his knees.

The fire is doused. It's reduced down to embers still simmering beneath his skin. It flickers and flares against Isaac's charred insides. He's singed and smoking. There's blood on his skin and in his mouth, but most of it is his. It's from claws puncturing his palms and brutal screams scalding his throat.

The hands return. The person has followed Isaac to the ground, kneeling in front of him, careful in the touch to his shoulder and arm.

It's Derek. He's sitting so close to Isaac, green eyes red-rimmed and lined with unshed tears. The air between them curdles with the scent of pain. It's so strong it almost ignites Isaac again. But then, Derek repeats, softer this time, "*Isaac.*"

"He killed you," Isaac croaks. It hurts to talk. It splits open lacerations that are trying to heal, trying to cauterize. "He tried to kill Scott."

"I know," Derek nods. "But we've found a better way, remember? Nobody deserves to die. You said that, didn't you?"

Isaac doesn't answer. He just deflates. He drops his forehead to Derek's shoulder and his hands fumble to *feel* the safety. He smears Derek's skin with the crimson mix of their blood, some old and halfway dry and some fresh and wet.

Peter doesn't understand pack. He underestimates the connection. It cost him before, and it's cost him again. He failed.

Isaac closes his eyes.

—

The sun rises over La Iglesia in soft shades of pink and purple.

"There's enough yellow wolfsbane to keep Peter out for the trip back," Argent says. "But be careful."

Isaac still kind of thinks they should kill Peter. He deserves it after what he did. Working with Kate, trying to kill Scott, letting Derek get caught in the crossfire. He's despicable, and Isaac wants him dead.

(He doesn't, really, but it's easier to unpack his anger this way. He doesn't know what to do with the rage embedded in his bones. Peter was working with *Kate*. He tried to kill *Scott*. He let *Derek* die. It's too

much, and Isaac is too tired, and wishing death is so easy.)

“You’re really going with them?” Scott asks.

“I made a deal with the Calaveras weeks ago. They’ll leave you alone. All of you,” Argent says, casting his eyes over the group. “But only if I help them catch Kate.”

“What if you can’t?” Kira asks.

“I’ll find her,” Argent says without hesitation. “Someone has to.”

Isaac doesn’t doubt Argent’s abilities, knows he’s perfectly capable of tracking down his sister. He just wonders what it’s going to cost him. Argent deserves a moment of calm. They all do.

And yet, Argent is giving them reprieve. He’s sacrificing his safety for theirs. He’s sacrificing his peace for Scott’s. It’s the Allison thing to do. He’s living in his daughter’s honor, learning from her bravery. They all are.

It hurts to think about, a sharp sting fizzing in Isaac’s bloodstream.

Argent turns and walks away, joining the Calaveras in their departure.

He’s not the only one leaving. Braeden’s job here is done, and she has another to attend to. Like Argent, she might not want to leave, but she has to. She’s going, but she stops to say goodbye to Isaac first.

“Keep up the good work with the daggers,” she says, sincere in her praise. “And keep Derek out of trouble, will you?”

There’s humor in her words, but Isaac doesn’t miss the heaviness to her gaze. She really and truly cares about Derek. As momentary as it was, she was ravaged by his death. They both were.

“Yeah, of course,” Isaac nods. He wants to say something more, something better, but he’s never been very good at goodbyes.

It’s strange. As a nameless figure of sacrifice, Braeden meant so much to Isaac. And now, she has a name and a personality and an identity. She’s not a symbol anymore. She’s real, but she still means just as much to Isaac, if not more. She might not realize her impact, but she saved his life, she taught him how to fight with the daggers, and she made Derek smile and let his guard down. She’s been monumental.

Isaac doesn’t want her to go, but he can’t stop her. Besides, he has

hope that she won't stay away for too long.

When Braeden walks away, Stiles fills her spot. He doesn't say anything at first, just stands beside Isaac in companionable silence.

Isaac observes him. It's been less than three months since their first rescue mission to Mexico, but Stiles looks markedly better already. Time hasn't necessarily been kind to them, but it's been *something*. It brought them space at least. It's furthered the distance between Stiles and the nogitsune, and, now, standing under the rising sun, he doesn't look so sickly. He still has a long way to go, he'll probably never be the same, but he's built back up to his usual one hundred and forty-seven pounds of pale skin and fragile bone. It's a good sight.

"Lydia's okay, by the way," Stiles breaches the quiet. Then, shaking his head like he can't quite believe what he's about to say, "Kate sent a berserker to the school, but Lydia, *Mason*, and *my dad* figured it out... apparently."

"That's good," Isaac says. It's a dull reply, but he means it. He's glad Lydia is okay. He's grown fond of her, maybe even grown to consider her a friend. Maybe.

"Are you okay?" Stiles asks, after a moment. "Before we went into the temple, I – I didn't want to leave you like that. But."

There's an unspoken apology in Stiles' words, one Isaac refuses to accept. Not because he's resentful, but because it's unnecessary. Isaac ignores the regret and the question, only to say, "Derek told you to go."

Stiles looks at him. If Isaac is refusing to accept the apology, then Stiles is refusing to accept the bullshit response. He's not letting Isaac off that easily, watching him with expectant eyes.

Isaac sighs. "I'm okay, I guess."

"He says with the most miserable expression I've ever seen," Stiles grumbles.

Isaac scoffs, smiling just so. "Ask me again when my mouth doesn't taste like my own blood and my hands aren't covered in my bro—"

Stiles' eyebrows raise. "Go on, finish that sentence," he goads. "Your bruh...?"

“Derek’s. When my hand’s aren’t covered in Derek’s blood,” Isaac says.

Stiles nods, tilting in disbelief and mouthing, “*Okay.*” Still, despite the ammunition, Stiles doesn’t fire. He doesn’t press. He lets it go, lets Isaac have this one. Isaac is reminded why he loves him.

Thinking of Derek, Isaac’s eyes trail across the desert to find him. He’s saying goodbye to Braeden. They’re kissing, and, usually, Isaac would look away, but he doesn’t. He waits long enough to see Derek’s sad smile as Braeden drives away.

Isaac leaves Stiles’ side to join Derek’s. They stand together, watching the car until it fades from view. Then, Isaac gives a light tug to Derek’s arm. He turns his head. He’s sad and a little heartbroken and definitely exhausted. Isaac pulls him in for another hug, and Derek takes the comfort.

It’s been a hard night, one that’s going to leave scars and residual hurt. One that, unfortunately, will be best healed by time.

—

“Then, Stiles said that Scott and Kira were stuck in Mexico, which is why they missed the game. Uh, so we went down to Mexico to drive them back from Mexico and that’s why we all missed practice,” Liam explains. Coach stares him down. Liam fumbles under the intensity, finishing with, “Cause... we were... all... in Mexico.”

Isaac hangs his head in exasperation. This is the single worst excuse that has ever been told.

“Why were you in Mexico?” Coach asks, eyes wide in his intensity, “I thought – I thought you were picking Kira up from Beacon County.”

“Uhh... We – We got lost,” Scott pulls his chin back, voice tipping like a question.

Isaac takes it back. *This* is the single worst excuse that has ever been told. (*Like alpha like beta.*)

There’s a sustained pause. Isaac watches as Coach seems to do calculations in his mind, eyes flitting from one player to the next. Something seems to be boiling within, like he’s getting closer and closer to his typical outrage. Isaac steels himself for it, ready to be called out, but the explosion never comes.

Instead, Coach says, “Okay. I believe you.”

Isaac balks. He’s not the only one surprised, evident in the way Liam squeaks, “Really?”

“Absolutely not,” Coach grits out, eyebrows furrowing and crushing Isaac’s hopes for a rational discussion.

Isaac spares a quick glance towards Stiles, wincing at the catastrophe unfolding before them.

Coach stares off into the distance, “I’ve had experiences south of the border that would knock the genitals off you boys.”

Isaac has to look away from Stiles, struggling not to laugh at the sudden shift in the conversation.

“Still,” Coach barks, coming back into focus. “Let me be clear to you three,” he says, speaking to Scott, Stiles, and Isaac with a pointed finger. “This kid’s the best talent I’ve seen in years. So, he’s your responsibility now. You boys are gonna stick together. You’re gonna look out for each other. And you’re gonna have each other’s backs. You got it?”

Isaac looks at Liam, then at Scott. They’re both smiling. Isaac can’t help but do the same.

“We got it,” Scott says, nodding.

Things might have gotten off to a rocky start with Liam, but he’s with them now. Liam is Scott’s first beta, he’s his responsibility, but it doesn’t seem so scary anymore. Because Liam is learning, he trusts them, *and* he saved Scott’s life. He overcame his fear of the berserkers, and he saved him.

Liam isn’t just Scott’s responsibility. He’s part of the pack, and, now, they’re stronger than ever.

They’re going to stick together. They’re going to look out for each other. They’re going to have each other’s backs. Because that’s what pack does. Because, together, they can face anything.

Chapter End Notes

Closing out season 4 with some new trauma for Isaac, but that’s pretty standard, right?

Creatures of the Night

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 1

Word count: 6,349

Chapter Notes

Thank you for being patient during my break! Enjoy the new season!

There's a storm brewing outside. Isaac can see the leaves swirling on the pavement and the dark clouds rolling in. A few raindrops slip through, falling to the windows of the comic store. It does nothing to dampen Isaac's mood.

It's been six months since the fight in Mexico. Things haven't been perfect. There was the decision to send Peter to Eichen House. There was the month where Isaac had nightmares reliving Derek's death every time he closed his eyes. (The nightmares still haven't gone away completely. Isaac's not sure they ever will.) And there's been an ever present battle against wolf fur in the loft.

Things haven't been perfect, but they've been better. And, now, it's their last night of summer. It's their last night before senior year. Nothing could break Isaac's happiness.

Except, maybe, for the sound of Stiles laying on the horn. He's been holding it down for at least fifteen seconds, even as Isaac scrambles to unpin his name tag and lock up the shop on his way out.

Scott is standing by the open passenger side door, waiting to let Isaac in with an apologetic sort of smile. Isaac gives him a small wave, jogging over to avoid the light fall of rain. As he climbs in, he shouts, "Would you shut up? You're going to get me fired!"

"You're not going to get fired," Stiles yells back. He releases the horn midway through, suddenly dropping the volume of his voice. Isaac clambers into the backseat, sliding in next to Liam. Stiles twists back to look at him, "You thought more about where you're applying for college?"

Isaac groans, thumping his head back against the headrest. "Give it a

rest, Stiles.”

Stiles asks Isaac about his future plans at least once a week. Isaac would like to have an answer for him, but he’s entirely lost. Isaac went from having no future prospects to having infinite opportunities. It’s overwhelming. So, no, Isaac doesn’t know where he’s applying for college.

“All right, fine, but if you want to be part of the vision, you better figure it out soon,” Stiles says.

Stiles talks about the vision all the time too, but Isaac likes the vision. He likes how hard Stiles is trying to keep him included, refusing to abandon Isaac. It’s nice.

With Scott back in the car, Stiles stops berating Isaac and shifts gears. He pulls out of the parking lot, beginning the next leg of their carpool: to pick up Malia.

“So, Isaac,” Liam says, sitting up a little straighter and forcing casual, “what’s at midnight?”

“Do *not* tell him,” Scott and Stiles parrot at once.

Isaac laughs, and says, “Sorry, Liam. It’s a senior thing.”

Liam slumps, seeming frustrated by the response. Isaac remembers what it was like to be a younger brother. He remembers when Camden was a senior, remembers asking him over and over where he was going. Isaac was ten at the time (“*I’m almost eleven, Cam.*”) and he knew senior year meant almost gone. Isaac knew senior year meant he was one step closer to being left behind, a reality much harsher than he ever could have imagined.

Isaac remembers how Camden told him not to worry, that it wasn’t as exciting as it seemed. Isaac wonders if he meant the senior scribe or growing up.

Now, Isaac is living the life of a younger brother again, but it’s different with Derek. Maybe it’s because there’s only six years between them instead of seven, or maybe it’s because they didn’t meet till Isaac was sixteen. Whatever the reason, Isaac and Derek view each other as equals. Like Camden, Derek is Isaac’s protector, but Isaac protects him just as fiercely. The dynamic is different, but valuable just the same.

Being with Liam is something else entirely. The two of them still

aren't terribly close, though not for lack of trying. Isaac likes Liam, finds him endearing and is often in awe of his power. But, Isaac is awkward and Liam is naturally closed off. So, they're friendly, but they're nowhere close to brothers.

And yet, every now and again, Isaac gets a glimpse of it. He sees the connection beginning to form, sees where it could go. Isaac doesn't want to force it, but he sees the potential. He feels it, feels how much he cares for and wants to help Liam. It's a strange instinct, one Isaac has never really experienced before.

"You guys having trouble with your phones?" Scott asks, pulling Isaac out of his introspection.

However, before Isaac gets a chance to check, the engine of the Jeep splutters, slowing down as the headlights flicker in and out.

"Oh, what the hell?" Stiles complains as the Jeep comes to a complete stop, lights shutting off for good.

"You out of gas?" Liam asks.

"No, it's electrical," Stiles says, taking his keys from the ignition with a hint of sigh. "Probably the alternator again."

Stiles gets out of the car and Scott immediately follows after him. Isaac hangs back. He watches Liam closely, eyes narrowing.

"What?" Liam bites, not very intimidating but a little rough around the edges. He's defensive, always seems to be.

"Why do you smell like blood?" Isaac asks. He keeps his own demeanor calm, trying to express through his tone that he's not on the attack. It's concern that makes him ask.

Liam stutters, but doesn't say anything.

Isaac sighs, "Look, I don't expect you to tell me anything, but you *should* talk to Scott. Whatever it is, he's not going to be mad at you. I don't think he has it in him to be mad at you."

Isaac doesn't force Liam to respond, just exits the Jeep, leaving him alone with the words. Then, Isaac rounds the front of the vehicle, finding the hood popped open.

"That's a lot of duct tape," Isaac says, a little bit impressed. The car

seems to be at least fifty percent tape at this point.

Stiles meets Isaac with a glare much more menacing than what is called for. Isaac almost flinches at the sudden intensity. Beside him, Scott laughs, clapping a hand on Isaac's shoulder and explaining, "I literally just said that."

Isaac smiles. "Oh. Oops?"

"Yeah, *oops*," Stiles grumbles, not employing his usual brand of animation or wit.

Isaac frowns, crossing his arms over his chest, "Okay, what is your deal?"

Stiles looks up at Isaac. For a moment, it looks like he's going to put up a fight, but then, he deflates. He exhales, head hanging a little, "It's just... the last night of summer, you know, so I wanted to make sure everyone was there tonight."

"We'll make it," Scott says, gentle in his validation. He's seeing Stiles' stress and offering reassurance.

Isaac tries to do the same. "You can fix the Jeep, right? Don't you have some tools?"

"Yeah," Stiles says, picking up a roll of duct tape.

Usually, Isaac would give him shit for it, but not tonight. Isaac doesn't totally understand the significance of this night, but, if it's important to Stiles, then it's important to Isaac too. Isaac will bite his tongue and keep his snarky comments to himself if he has to.

So, that's what he does. He stands by and watches Stiles and Scott work on the Jeep, using copious amounts of duct tape.

A handful of minutes pass before they hear Liam call out from inside the Jeep. "Guys!"

"Yeah, give us a second, please," Stiles shouts in return, ripping off another section of tape.

Scott adds, "Yeah, Liam, stay in the car, okay?"

Then, out of nowhere, lightning strikes. There isn't time to react. One second, Stiles is breaking off tape with his teeth, and, the next, there's a bolt of lightning not three feet away. All Isaac can do is swing

around to face the strike, reaching out to grab Scott's wrist.

Just as quickly as it hits, the lightning disappears. It's a blink of electricity, sending sparks flying and leaving a circle of fiery red asphalt in its wake.

"That was close," Scott says.

Isaac lets go of his wrist.

"Very close," Stiles mutters.

Just as suddenly, the Jeep comes to life, engine rumbling and headlights blaring. Liam pushes his upper body out of the window, and asks, "Can we go now?"

—

The Jeep pulls into the hospital parking lot, passing by Malia and her dad as Stiles once again honks obnoxiously. He parks the car, leaning out the window to say, "Sorry we're late."

Malia hurries over, planting a hefty kiss onto Stiles' lips. Isaac instinctively looks away, meeting Scott's gaze instead. Scott smiles at him, a little knowingly, and says, "Hey, Iz. Good shift?"

"Yeah," Isaac nods, agreeing easily. He's been working at the comic store since late May and he's enjoyed every second of it. It's something that's only Isaac's, just a taste of independence. Isaac loves it.

"You boys do remember I own a gun, right?" Mr. Tate questions, drawing Isaac's focus away from Scott. He definitely hasn't forgotten the guns. And he still hasn't quite forgiven Mr. Tate for the bear trap incident either.

"Vividly," Stiles mumbles.

Mr. Tate shakes his head and turns to walk away. Stiles gets out of the front seat to let Malia in. As she climbs over the console, she says, "Liam, scooch."

"I was here first!" Liam complains.

Malia doesn't hesitate to say, "I was on earth first."

It makes Isaac laugh, earning himself an annoyed grumble from Liam even as he does as he's told, sliding into the dreaded middle seat.

The three get situated in the back of the Jeep, but Stiles doesn't drive away yet. Instead, he and Scott rotate in their seats, watching Malia expectantly. Isaac and Liam watch her too. They're all curious and a little worried.

"What?" Malia asks, having no difficulty noticing the blatant attention.

"Did you find out yet?" Stiles asks.

Malia pales, mouth parting as her irritation dips into something less strong. She's worried too.

"Find out what?" Liam asks.

Malia ignores him, resetting her facade of indifference and stating, "They're gonna email me."

Undeterred, Liam presses, "Is this about summer school?"

Malia looks at Stiles, appearing offended and a little hurt, "You told him?"

Stiles flounders, "Uhh—"

Liam cuts him off, and, stupidly, says, "Oh, no, all they said was you had to go to summer school 'cause the principal said your test scores weren't good enough and you might have to repeat junior year."

Malia huffs in frustration. Stiles stares at Liam with exasperated contempt, licking over his lips in a display of consideration. Making his verdict, he turns to Scott and says, "We should've left him chained to the tree."

—

Isaac stands by the hospital elevator, waiting for Scott to return from dropping Liam off. Isaac genuinely wants a moment to talk to Scott one-on-one, but he's also using it as an excuse to escape from Stiles. He's still bugging out and it's beginning to grate at Isaac's nerves.

So, he waits at the elevator until, eventually, the doors ping open and Scott walks out.

"Hey," Scott says, falling into stride with Isaac.

"Hey," Isaac repeats. Then, "Is Liam okay?"

Scott glances at Isaac, giving a brief, small smile. "Yeah, he's good. Just has some more learning to do."

"Well, it's a good thing he has you to help him," Isaac says. Liam has more anger and power to cope with than most bitten werewolves would, but he also has the best kind of alpha to guide him. If he sticks with Scott, if he keeps listening and learning, he'll have full control in no time. He's already well on his way.

"Us," Scott says.

"Huh?" Isaac questions, not following the statement.

"He has *us* to help him," Scott explains, meeting Isaac's gaze with something a little weighted.

"Right," Isaac says, nodding. "Definitely."

Scott smiles again, and then they round the corner into the main entrance of the hospital, finding Stiles and Malia waiting for them. As they approach, Scott says, "I still can't reach Kira."

"Okay," Stiles says, hands tapping together in that antsy way of his. "You reminded her about tonight though, right?"

"I think so," Scott says, shrugging. "She only texted me once this week."

Malia cuts in, "I spoke to her yesterday. We talked about it."

"So, she's coming?" Stiles asks, eyebrows lifted and neck leaning forward just so.

There's something more going on with Stiles. Sure, he's usually the obsessive type, but it's not like him to be so intense without reason. Senior scribe seems like such a simple thing to invest so much energy in, but something is going on. There's something more. Isaac just doesn't know what that is.

"She should be," Malia says, like she's starting to lose patience with Stiles, but she's *trying* to be supportive.

"Okay, right," Stiles says, nodding and continuing with the nervous twitch of his hand.

Just then, another stretcher is wheeled by, supporting an injured woman with blood streaking her forehead. It's the fifth stretcher to go

by in the less than ten minutes since they got here. It's not unusual for a hospital, but it is busier than normal.

Scott picks up on that too, and, just as Melissa is starting to follow after the newest patient, he asks, "Hey, Mom, where's all this coming from?"

Melissa slows her pace, calling over her shoulder, "A jackknifed tractor-trailer on 115, caused a major pile up."

Well, that explains Kira's no-show. She's been in New York for the past week and, as Stiles says, "There's only one way back into Beacon Hills from the airport."

"115," Scott answers.

Stiles is looking down, atmosphere shifting around him. "Kira's never going to make it."

"I can get her," Scott says, low and determined. He starts towards the exit, volume rising and speaking as he goes, "You guys head to the school, Lydia's probably already there. We'll meet you by midnight."

"How are you going to get to her in the middle of a traffic jam?" Stiles yells.

Scott stops on the edge of the hospital entrance. He doesn't explain, just says, "We'll make it. Trust me."

Then, he rushes out the door like it's more than a storm and a traffic jam they're fighting, like there's more at stake than missing senior scribe. Because Stiles cares, and so they all care.

—

Stiles, Malia, and Isaac take the Jeep to the school. Sitting in the backseat behind the couple, Isaac should maybe feel like a third wheel, but he doesn't. He feels comfortable and secure in his place of belonging. He's spent the past six months trying to get used to that. He still hasn't entirely succeeded, still finds himself grinning like an idiot if he thinks about it for too long.

Fortunately for Isaac, the ride from the hospital to the school is a short one, cutting off his wandering thoughts and preventing the embarrassment that kind of smile would inevitably cause.

On arrival, Isaac follows Malia and Stiles out of the car, running in the parking lot as the downpour really unleashes its fury.

They dash under one of the school's awnings, taking shelter from the rain and checking their phones for updates.

"Nothing from Scott," Isaac says.

"Or Kira," Malia adds.

"And nothing from Lydia either," Stiles says. He's looking away from Isaac and Malia, a plainly obvious avoidant tactic.

"I still don't know if I passed," Malia says. She's staring at Stiles' turned back, lips twitching like she wants to say something more. She has to build up to it, giving herself a moment, then blurting, "I don't want to do this unless I'm actually a senior."

"Yeah," Stiles says, turning his head to the side, but not fully looking back. He doesn't offer any actual reassurance, giving only the single syllable. He's staring out at the groups of friends rushing in from the rain, and, even through the scent of petrichor, Isaac can smell his stress.

Isaac shares a look with Malia, glancing between her and Stiles. This is their opening. This is their chance to figure out what's actually going on inside Stiles' head, but Isaac shouldn't be the one to break the ice. It should be Malia – hence why he's urging her forward with his eyes.

Malia's eyebrows furrow at his stare, but, as she follows Isaac's back and forth glances, she gets with the program. Malia takes a step closer to Stiles, and, then, because she's always full of surprises, she leans forward to sniff his shirt.

Stiles turns around, making a startled little noise at the close contact, "Huh?"

"What's wrong with you?" Malia asks, looking up at him. "You smell terrible."

Isaac steps closer too, and says, "It's anxiety."

"Yeah, and it should be a familiar scent for you by now since it's pretty much a constant state for me," Stiles half mumbles. He's trying to deflect with thin humor, but it doesn't work.

“Why’s this thing so important to you?” Malia asks.

“It’s not,” Stiles says at once. “It’s not. It’s uh...” He looks down and scratches his neck, like he’s just now realizing how erratic he’s been. “I don’t know. Maybe it is.” Stiles pauses, thinking. And, finally, he opens up, “All right, I asked my dad the other day about his high school friends. Guess how many he still talks to? *None*. Not a single one.”

“But, how many of these friends did he fight supernatural wars with?” Isaac asks, aiming to readjust Stiles’ perspective. They aren’t just friends from high school. They’ve saved each other’s lives too many times not to mean more than that. They’re friends not by accident, but by choice. They’re pack.

“Well, none, but! These were – These were his *best* friends! And he just says he lost touch with them, you know, so.” Stiles takes a breath. “So, I started thinking about things, like I always do.”

“Obsessively,” Malia fills in.

“Yeah. And so, I’m thinking, what if...” Stiles trails off for a moment, as if even saying this scares him. “What if Scott’s my best friend now, you know, but he’s not my best friend for life?”

Isaac wants to say they aren’t just best friends, wants to remind Stiles that he and Scott are *brothers*, but Malia speaks first. “Well, doesn’t that just happen sometimes?”

“Yeah, but only because we let it happen,” Stiles argues. He’s frustrated, but not at Malia, just generally. “You know, that – that’s what I’m saying. How come when we graduate we’re just expected to go our separate ways? If I’ve already found the best people in my life, why am I not trying to just... stay with them, you know?”

Suddenly, Isaac understands.

Isaac doesn’t want them to go their separate ways after high school. He never even considered it a possibility. Isaac’s *survival* is so intertwined with these people. Isaac is only alive because of them. Because of Derek, because of Scott, because of Stiles. Isaac is only alive because of them, so he simply *can’t* envision a future where they aren’t a part of his life.

These are the best people Isaac is going to meet. He doesn’t want to let go of them. He wouldn’t make it without them.

"I – I thought that was the plan," Malia says. Her wrists circle as she searches for the words, "The dream!"

"The *vision*," Stiles corrects, pointing at her, "and don't *mock* the vision."

"I... I like the vision," Malia says, taking another step forward. "Especially if I'm part of it."

Isaac thinks back to every moment over the past six months, every moment that Stiles spent badgering him about his after high school plans. It starts to make more sense. Isaac knew Stiles wasn't *just* being a pain in the ass – very rarely is – but he thought Stiles was only asking to look out for Isaac. He hadn't thought about the stakes Stiles had in it. Stiles wants to know Isaac's plan so he can make it part of his own.

It's touching in an unexpected way. Stiles cares *so much* about keeping everyone connected that he's willing to do all the work for them. Stiles was creating the vision not just for himself, but for his friends.

"So that's why you wanted everyone here tonight," Malia says, beginning to recognize Stiles' motivation.

"Because you don't want to lose all your friends after high school," Isaac adds. Stiles looks at him. Their eye contact is heavy, understanding passes in between.

"And I hope they don't want to lose me either," Stiles says.

Isaac doesn't want to lose Stiles. He doesn't want to lose any of his friends. Though, he doesn't say that because, in that same moment, Malia leans in to kiss Stiles.

Well, now, he feels like a third wheel.

As he usually does, Isaac turns his head on a reflex, pivoting away from Stiles and Malia. When he does, he sees Liam sprinting towards them.

Malia must hear Liam because she breaks the kiss with Stiles, acting fast. Before Isaac can stop her, she's slamming a hand into Liam's chest and shoving him to the ground. Isaac's protest dies on his lips as Liam gets the wind thoroughly knocked out of him.

"Oh my god!" Stiles exclaims.

Liam groans. Still, he pants through the impact, gaining enough breath to say, “Scott’s in trouble.”

There’s no hesitation. Nobody questions how Liam knows. They trust the bond between an alpha and his beta, and they follow it.

They follow Liam around to the back of the school, running through sheets of rain and sprinting down stone steps. They come onto the edge of the overpass, and that’s when Scott enters their view.

Scott kneels on the ground, stomach impaled on the claws of a large, unfamiliar werewolf. Scott’s features are contorted into his werewolf form, but his eyes are a dull, human brown.

The sight brings them to a stuttering stop. Liam doesn’t lunge, but he does immediately poise himself for an attack, teeth bared in a vicious growl. Isaac doesn’t do the same.

Visions of Boyd, and Allison, and Aiden flash through Isaac’s mind. He sees blood and water mixing in a swirl of diluted crimson. He sees Allison’s hands covering her stomach, knocked back by the blow of pain and shock. He sees Aiden in this same stairwell, life leaving his body as his twin feels every second of it.

Isaac doesn’t prepare for a fight. He braces for a loss. His name is a ghost of a whisper, a breath of, “*Scott.*”

The rain is pouring down around them, echoing loud against the cement above, but Isaac can hardly hear it. All he hears is Scott’s groans of pain and shaky breaths.

Isaac doesn’t know what to do. None of them do. It’s been six months of relative quiet, six months of almost peace. They’ve turned comfortable, and, now, none of them are prepared. Isaac isn’t prepared to see Scott on his knees, body swaying just so, as if he’s struggling to stay conscious.

No one knows what to do, so no one does anything. Isaac doesn’t even breathe. The air catches in his throat, and then it stays there, suspended tight in tension. He’s locked in limbo. They all are.

Then, like a gust of wind blowing in, the air shifts. And, suddenly, Scott is grabbing the werewolf by the wrist. Scott’s pained noises turn to threatening snarls and the sway of his body solidifies into

undeniable strength. Slowly, Scott looks up. He looks past his prominent brow bone, and, as he does, there's a glint of glowing red. Scott's eyes shine bright, glimmering like rubies in their intensity.

Isaac breathes. He exhales the air in his lungs, pulling in fresh oxygen with a flood of relief.

Scott rises to his feet. Even with claws still embedded in his stomach, Scott pushes past the limitations. He presses up, careful and calculated, staring down the other werewolf with fierce determination.

Scott is physically injured, but it's going to take more than a pair of claws to break his force of will. Scott fights past the pain, and, once he's steady, he grabs the werewolf's arm with both hands. Then, he snaps it. Scott twists until the bone crunches, breaking through the surface of skin as the other werewolf roars in pain, crashing to his own knees.

Scott rips the detached claws from his stomach, scattering them across the ground with a soft clatter. All the while, he never takes his eyes off the werewolf.

"I don't know who you are, or what you thought you were going to do, but I'll give you a choice," Scott speaks. His voice is rough and a little distorted by the drop of his fangs, but he's otherwise unshaken. "You can stay and I'll break something else... or you can run."

The wolf hesitates. He looks around, eyes falling on Stiles, who says, "I'd run."

And so, the werewolf does. Still clutching his injured arm, the wolf darts out of the overpass and disappears into the rain. No one follows him. They just let him go.

Instead, the group circles together. Scott's features return to human, and, for a brief moment, his eyes lock with Isaac's. Scott's have faded back to their usual brown, but they aren't dull anymore. They glimmer with that same intensity, twinkling with a spark of life.

Scott is okay.

Though, it's no thanks to Isaac. Scott pulled himself from the ground. He saved himself, same as he saves everyone else. And Isaac did nothing. He just stood there and watched. As always, Isaac was too late or too slow or too scared. Scott had to do it all alone.

But he's okay. His eyes are alive and his heart is beating steady and Isaac can breathe again.

Scott and Isaac's contact breaks, and that's when Isaac sees him. Another werewolf. He's lingering at the edge of the pack, a straggler and a stranger.

"You don't remember me, do you?" the werewolf asks, attention directed at Scott, smiling and stepping closer. "I guess I look a little different since the fourth grade."

Recollection crosses Scott's face. He squints, asking, "Theo?"

The werewolf – Theo, apparently – nods.

"You know him?" Malia asks.

There's a distant memory tickling at the back of Isaac's mind, though it doesn't float to the forefront. The memory is trapped, lost in the haze of time and messy childhood trauma, but it's there. It's a flicker of familiarity, a hint of recognition.

"They used to," Theo says, smiling still. "Trust me, I never thought I'd see you guys again."

Isaac frowns. He wonders if he's included in the 'guys.' He wonders if Theo remembers him, if he's supposed to be able to do the same.

"A couple months ago I heard of an alpha in Beacon Hills. When I found out his name was Scott McCall," Theo shakes his head, shrugging, "just couldn't believe it." (Theo smiles too much, it irks something in Isaac.) "Not just an alpha, but a *true* alpha."

Scott swallows, like maybe he doesn't know what to say to that. He asks, "What do you want?"

"I came back to Beacon Hills," Theo says, like that's explanation enough. "Back home, with my family... because I want to be a part of your pack."

Isaac's eyes flit to Stiles. Stiles meets his gaze. Their feelings align, cringing and skeptical. It's an instinct, a lurch in Isaac's gut that says, *unknown, unfamiliar, unsafe*.

—

The pack – minus Liam – enter the school, escaping out of the rain just

as it begins to lighten up outside.

Typical.

“We haven’t seen this kid in years,” Stiles says, never one to shy away from sharing his opinion, especially when it comes to a matter of safety. “You don’t find that highly suspicious?”

“I’m kinda more concerned about the guy who just tried to kill me,” Scott says.

All of it concerns Isaac. It seems like their period of rest is coming to an end. Isaac isn’t ready for it. He isn’t ready to let go of this bliss just yet, not when he’s only just starting to settle into it.

Malia’s phone buzzes.

Instantly, the group stops walking. They pause and turn, watching for her reaction. Her heart beats a little faster. Then, she looks up, breathing deep and releasing an exhale of, “I’m in.” Her eyebrows draw together, and, sounding almost confused, “I passed.”

Stiles doesn’t waste a second. Immediately, he pulls her into a tight hug.

Isaac looks at Scott. They share in the infectious joy, smiling at each other in relief. They’re all going to be together. At least for one more year.

“I’m officially a senior,” Malia announces, grinning as she breaks the hug with Stiles.

“*Thank god,*” a familiar voice travels over, accompanied by the even more familiar click of heels. “Where have you guys been? The whole senior class is here,” Lydia complains as she approaches, though the facade falls fast. She smiles, a little playful, “Are we doing this or not?”

Isaac spares a glance around the group. He breathes in the deep scent of happiness and the feeling of *together*. He commits it all to memory, one that won’t fade with time or get lost in heartache. He makes it a memory so strong that it will be with him always.

Even if this doesn’t last forever, even if the end of high school draws near and disaster comes closer, he’ll always have this moment. Isaac will always remember standing among his friends.

Lydia is right. The library is busier than it's probably ever been, full of students about to embark on the same endeavor, all about to begin their senior year. Though, honestly, for Isaac, they're only background noise.

Isaac stands in line with the best people he's ever met and he waits with them. He focuses on the quiet conversation, on the mundane activity turned precious with the company. He waits with them until it's their turn to put their mark on history, to sign themselves into a forever memory.

Stiles goes first. Then, Lydia. Then, with some hesitation, Kira. Then, Malia.

She hands the marker to Isaac, and then it's his turn. He steps up to the shelf, eyes pouring over the vast array of initials. Everyone of these students had a life here, had a story, had a name.

Isaac's eyes snag on a single signature. It's just like the others, but it stands out in stark contrast, in familiar handwriting. Isaac can't miss it. **C.L.**

Isaac's breath shudders in his chest, but he keeps moving, doesn't allow himself to hold up the line. He swallows the build of emotions and lets his eyes drift to the signatures of his friends. Their initials are huddled together, cementing their friendship in not-so-permanent marker.

Isaac joins the pack, writing slow and careful: **I.L.**

Isaac hesitates a second more, then caps the pen and hands it to Scott. Isaac falls in line with the others, watching as Scott completes their circle.

Scott writes his own initials, marked by the squeaking of brush tip on metal, but he doesn't back away. He doesn't pass the marker off or close the moment. He stays in it, pausing for what must only be thirty seconds, but feels like hours instead.

And then, Scott adds another name. He adds the final piece of their puzzle: **A.A.**

Isaac's heart clenches in his chest.

Tonight, the pack is together, but they're not *all* together. They're not whole, and they never will be. They're surrounded by loss. There's holes all around them, gaps of darkness threatening to swallow them down.

Scott steps back. Isaac puts a hand on his arm, right over his tattoo.

"She would've been with us," Stiles says.

"Yeah," Scott agrees. Isaac squeezes over the black bands of ink, just a light touch of pressure, an unspoken, *I'm here*.

Allison should be here.

"She still is," Lydia says.

Allison is with them every step of the way. She's gone, but she'll never truly leave them. She's alive in their memories and the lessons they've learned from her. Her voice is warped in Isaac's mind, but her words aren't. He remembers them clear as anything, bright as the smiles she shared.

Isaac is only here because of Allison. Every step, he takes for her.

And so, when they walk down the library stairs, they're not quite whole, but they're together nonetheless.

—

Stiles drops Malia off first, then continues driving towards the loft. It's a relatively quiet ride, apart from Stiles' incessant need to hum along to every song on the radio. Isaac wishes he would just sing, the humming is both too quiet and too loud.

Eventually, Isaac's had enough of it. He turns the volume knob down so low that he's certain Stiles can barely hear it.

"Hey!" Stiles whines. "I'm the one driving your little werewolf ass, I get to—"

Isaac cuts him off, asking, "How well do you remember Theo?"

Stiles goes a little wide-eyed, flicking from the road to Isaac and back again. "I – I don't know. Well enough."

"I can hardly remember him," Isaac says, scrubbing a frustrated hand through his hair. "It's driving me nuts. I should be able to remember

him.”

“Do you remember *me* from fourth grade?” Stiles asks. Isaac’s pretty sure the question is meant to be nonchalant, but it’s not. It’s strained and practiced. It takes Isaac a good few seconds to realize why.

“That was the year your mom died,” Isaac says. “Wasn’t it?”

Stiles nods, giving an exaggerated, “*Bingo*.” Then, before Isaac can say anything, “She died at the start of the year, so. I remember all of it.”

“Right,” Isaac says because he doesn’t really know what else to say.

Fourth grade was a fairly normal year for Isaac. At that point, his own mom had been dead for four years, he still had another year till Matt drowned in his pool, and another two before Camden died. There’s no standout trauma. If anything, these should be some of Isaac’s happiest childhood memories.

And yet, the most Isaac remembers of Theo is a distorted yearbook photo.

He remembers Stiles though. He remembers a scrawny kid, dotted with moles and smiling with crooked teeth. He remembers when Stiles left school for a bit. He remembers how, when he came back, everyone tiptoed around him. He remembers waiting for Stiles to go off like a bomb, but he never did. Even back then, Stiles hid from everyone.

“There’s something off about him,” Stiles says, wading through the stifling silence.

“He smiles too much,” Isaac agrees.

That pulls a laugh from Stiles, “*That’s* what you’re worried about? How much he smiles?”

Isaac shrugs, grumbling, “It’s creepy.”

“Okay, yeah, I guess,” Stiles says, still chuckling lightly. Then, “I don’t know, man. It just feels like too much of a coincidence, you know? It’s been pretty quiet around here for six months, and then Theo and this other werewolf show up at the same time? There’s just – There’s something strange about it.”

“You don’t have to convince me,” Isaac says. “I get it.”

“Well, I’m gonna try to talk to my dad and he’s definitely going to play devil’s advocate, so I’m just practicing my speech on you,” Stiles says, a little sarcastic, but mostly genuine.

“It sounds good to me. Except, maybe,” Isaac drags the vowel out, joking, “mention the smiling thing?”

“I swear, you are the weirdest and most annoying person that I have ever met,” Stiles mutters, though it’s still intended for Isaac to hear.

Isaac breathes a laugh. “And yet...” he holds up a finger, “you don’t want to lose me after high school.”

Stiles shoots him a quick glare and mumbles even quieter, “Shut up.”

It’s not often that Isaac gets to be the one holding emotional maturity over Stiles. Usually, Isaac is the one grumbling and glaring, but, unsurprisingly, he can’t find it in himself to be cruel about the role reversal. Instead, he puts Stiles out of his misery and says, “I don’t want to lose you either.”

There’s a faint smile on Stiles’ lips. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Isaac says. “I guess I should start looking into colleges.”

“You haven’t even started looking?” Stiles all but shouts.

“I’ve been busy!” Isaac defends.

“Doing what?” Stiles scoffs. “Seeing movies with me? Calling Scott? Grooming Derek’s fur?”

Isaac huffs. He doesn’t know how to say that, for the first time, he’s trying to live right now, in this moment, no longer wishing his life away. He can’t say that, it’s too much, but he does go a little vulnerable. Because he can and because he wants to. “It’s overwhelming, okay? I never thought I’d make it this far and I have no idea what I’m doing. Derek never went to college and Camden just went straight to the military so—”

“So, you couldn’t ask *anyone* else for help?” Stiles taunts, only a little bit mean, and only because Isaac maybe deserves it. While he is getting better at recognizing his place in the pack, he’s still not very good at depending on others. It still makes him feel like a burden.

“Well,” Isaac says, and because he’s a menace, “I guess I *could* ask

Scott...”

“You know what? I take it back. I hope your future is terrible and I’m not in it,” Stiles jabs. His heart skips like ten beats.

Isaac only smiles, turning up the radio and putting the conversation to an end. Stiles almost immediately starts to hum again, but Isaac isn’t as bothered by it this time. He’d rather have Stiles’ off-beat drumming on the steering wheel and out of key humming than not have him at all.

The future is wide open and uncertain, but Isaac feels sure of one thing: he’s going to do everything he can to stay with the people he’s already found. The *best* people in his life. His friends. His pack.

Parasomnia

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 2

Word count: 11,850

Chapter Notes

We've reached the halfway point!

"Come on, Isaac! You're going to be late!" Derek's voice travels up the spiral staircase, reaching Isaac in his bedroom.

"Just a second!" Isaac yells back, struggling and hopping to get his shoe on. The heel of his sneaker keeps getting stuck, making Isaac groan in frustration. He kneels down, having to actually untie the laces. Not a great start to his first day.

Once the shoe is on, Isaac grabs his bag and jogs down the stairs, only just managing to catch the banana Derek chucks at him.

"Some warning next time?" Isaac grumbles, already starting to peel the fruit.

"You need to eat breakfast and we need to go," Derek says, not showing any remorse.

Isaac rolls his eyes, "I wouldn't be late if everything I owned wasn't covered in fur. I mean, seriously, what do you do when I'm not home? Prance around as a wolf?"

Derek shrugs, "Maybe."

Isaac basically ignores him, just continues complaining, "How does the hair even get upstairs? It's ridiculous."

"Quit whining. I'll buy you a lint roller," Derek says. And, "You ready?"

"Yep," Isaac says.

Then, they head on their way. Isaac finishes the banana in the elevator, tossing the peel in a trashcan on the edge of the parking lot

and joining Derek in the car.

As they get closer to the high school, Isaac spitefully picks a single black wolf hair off his jeans. He blows it at Derek.

“Do you want to walk?” Derek asks. “I will pull this car over right now.”

Isaac laughs, “Sorry, couldn’t help myself.”

“You’re a menace,” Derek says.

Isaac only leans back in his seat, smiling just a little. Isaac’s not really sure how he feels about his first day of senior year, but he knows how he feels about this. These car rides with Derek, their little domestic life together... Isaac loves it. He knows the rides to school aren’t forever, but the love between them is, and that’s all that matters. Whatever happens, they’ll always find each other.

—

“Have a good first day,” Derek says as they pull up in front of the school. “Don’t cause any trouble.”

Isaac grins, already stepping out of the car. He leans down to say, “I’ll try.” Then, he closes the car door and turns to face Beacon Hills High School. Last first day.

It’s a big milestone, but it doesn’t feel as grand as Isaac expected. It feels a little mundane. Though, honestly, with the life he leads, mundane isn’t so bad.

Isaac sees Stiles and Malia arriving at school, and goes to walk with them, saying, “Hey.”

“Hey, Isaac,” Stiles says. “We were just talking about Theo.”

“Oh, did you talk to your dad?” Isaac asks, remembering Stiles’ silly practice speech and their joint suspicion from the night before.

“Yeah, and he was absolutely no help, *but*,” with emphasis and a pause for dramatic effect, “Parrish was.”

“Okay, so, you ran a background check, and all you found was a speeding ticket?” Malia questions, steering the conversation back to where it was before Isaac interrupted.

“Speeding ticket signed by Theo’s dad eight years ago,” Stiles says, both pointer fingers held up, like this is definitive proof.

It isn’t. A speeding ticket from Theo’s dad certainly isn’t hard evidence. It’s not very menacing at all. Actually, that’s pretty mundane too. So, Isaac asks, “What does that mean exactly?”

“Who speeds?” Stiles prompts, coming to a stop and spinning around with intensity. Malia and Isaac share a quick glance, but neither says anything. Stiles continues, “People trying to get away from something.”

“Well, how many tickets do you have?” Malia asks.

“None,” Stiles says, indignant.

“How many would you have if your dad didn’t get you out of them?” Malia clarifies.

Stiles pauses, thinking and dragging out the answer of, “Seventeen.”

Stiles scrunches his nose, falling a little flat as he sees the holes in his argument.

“I don’t know, Stiles,” Malia says, sounding unsure and not quite convinced. “I mean, I see why you’re worried. He’s really hot. He’s got, like, great hair, perfect body. You should definitely feel *threatened*.”

“Thank you. Because I do,” Stiles says, nodding emphatically. “Now more than ever.”

Isaac can’t help but laugh, earning him a sharp glare from Stiles.

“You want me to torture him?” Malia asks, genuine in the offer. That makes Isaac laugh a little bit too.

“Yeah, no, Stiles doesn’t condone torture. Even of the psychological variety,” Isaac says, smirking something smug and familiar.

“The two of you are terrifying,” Stiles says. And, finger waving between them, “You are never allowed to hang out unsupervised. I do *not* trust this dynamic.”

Isaac scoffs, but it’s tinted with humor. Then, “If torture is off the table, then what’s the plan?”

(Isaac is pretty sure he's past the point of actually being willing to torture anybody, but the banter is light and good and harmless.)

"If we want to do this right, there are steps," Stiles says.

"What steps?" Malia asks. She may not be convinced that Theo is a source of danger, but she'll go along with it for Stiles' sake. She wants to help and be involved in order to calm Stiles down. It's sweet.

"We get the story. Verify the facts. We find the piece that doesn't fit and... and catch him in the act," Stiles says. "That's how you do it."

It's a vague, but reasonable plan. It makes sense. It's a process, and Isaac feels better having it under their belts.

In all honesty, Isaac doesn't really know how to feel about Theo. His coincidental return makes Isaac nervous and Stiles' blatant mistrust feeds into that anxiety, but, really, Isaac is neutral. Or he's trying to be.

Just then, Theo steps out of his mom's car. He turns around, bag slung over his shoulder, and catches sight of the group. He lifts a hand to wave, flashing *another* too bright smile.

"Why are you so suspicious of this guy?" Malia asks.

Stiles exhales, breath catching in his throat to cause a quiet grunt. "Because I remember Theo from fourth grade. Okay?" He squints. "That's *not* Theo."

—

After that, Isaac departs to his first class of the day. It's an art history elective, one Isaac chose partly on impulse and partly because Mr. Yukimura recommended it. Isaac needed to fill his schedule and he likes the way Mr. Yukimura teaches, so he figured, *why not?*

Now, Isaac enters the classroom. It's still fairly empty – Derek was definitely being dramatic about how late Isaac was – but there is one familiar face among the filled desks.

Isaac slides into the seat in front of her, twisting around to say, "Hey, Lydia."

Not noticing his arrival with how invested she is in her book, Lydia spooks just a little. She looks up in a start, holding her hand over her

heart and scolding, “Don’t do that!”

Isaac smiles, wincing a little, “Sorry.”

He hadn’t actually meant to scare her, but it is also kind of funny.

Lydia gives a little *hmpf!* and makes a show of unnecessarily smoothing down her floral shirt. She says, “I didn’t know you were in this class.”

Isaac shrugs, “I like art.” Then, “What’re you reading?”

“Oh,” Lydia lifts the book. It’s leather bound and blank on the cover, looking more like a journal than anything else. “It’s a physical copy of the bestiary. I thought it would be good to have one around.”

“Wait, you – you translated the entire thing and turned it into an actual book?” Isaac questions, impressed and a little in awe.

“What,” Lydia says, “like it’s hard?”

Isaac laughs, “Right. Sorry. Genius.”

Lydia smiles at him. It’s a small thing, mouth closed and lips painted a soft pink.

“What do you need the bestiary for now?” Isaac asks, leaning a little closer to get a better look at the book. He’s looking at it upside down, but he can read the title of *Werecoyote* and he can look at the pictures – a diagram of their full shifted form as well as a close up of a coyote’s paw.

“I’ve been looking through it trying to figure out what Parrish is, but I haven’t gotten anywhere. I’ve exhausted every page and none of it fits,” Lydia says, disappointed with a hint of frustration. Lighter, she offers, “You can borrow it if you like. I’ve already read the whole thing at least twice.”

“Really?” Isaac asks, unable to hide the small note of excitement in his voice.

Again, Lydia smiles at him. This time, it’s wider, more of a proper grin. She says, “Sure.”

Lydia picks up the book, passing it over to Isaac. He turns it around in his grip, positioning the page right side up. His eyes are drawn to the smaller diagram of a werecoyote’s leg, reading a description that

states: *In their full shifted form, werecoyotes carry a unique trait. While quadruped animals naturally walk on the balls of their feet, coyotes are known to use this ability to move with stealth and go undetected.*

“Did you know coyotes tiptoe?” Isaac asks, looking up at Lydia with wonder in his eyes.

Lydia doesn’t get a chance to respond because Mr. Yukimura walks in, saying, “All right, folks, welcome to Art History. We’ll begin with a lesson on one of the most famous pieces of artwork in the world: *The Last Supper*. This painting was done by Leonardo Da Vinci between 1495 and 1498. It is a depiction of the last moment of peace before predicted betrayal.”

Isaac spins around in his seat, facing the board and sliding the bestiary into his bag with care.

—

During his free period, Isaac meets with Scott. They sit on the steps outside, enjoying the sunshine and the soon to be dwindling summer warmth.

“So, how’s your first day of senior year going?” Scott asks.

Isaac shrugs, “It’s good. Not as magical as I thought it would be.”

Scott gives a little frown, “It doesn’t feel special?”

“I mean, it does a little, but I don’t know,” Isaac says. “I expected it to feel like a huge milestone. Like an ‘oh my god, I can’t believe I actually got here’ kind of thing, you know? Instead, it just feels like a regular day.”

“Regular isn’t so bad,” Scott says.

“Oh, no, yeah, don’t get me wrong, I am loving feeling normal,” Isaac says, making Scott chuckle. “It’s just. Okay, this is probably going to sound so corny, so don’t make fun of me, but... I think those big milestones happen when you least expect them, or, like, it’s a more gradual thing? Like, you just wake up one day and realize everything’s different and you’re in a place you never thought you would be.”

Scott nods, “Yeah, I guess progress just sort of happens whenever it wants to.”

“Exactly,” Isaac says, glad Scott understands what he’s trying to say. It’s not that starting senior year isn’t a big deal – because it is. There was a period in Isaac’s life where he thought he would never make it this far. But that ended a while ago. Isaac doesn’t remember when the shift happened, but it certainly wasn’t this morning. “Anyway, how were your classes?”

“Good, I think. I’m in AP Biology this year and it’s already stressing me out,” Scott says. “I feel like I’m not supposed to be there.”

Isaac shakes his head, “No way. You’ve worked your ass off and you’re smart as hell. You’ll be fine.”

Scott smiles, “Thanks. What about you? You’re in that new elective with Lydia, right? The – The art one?”

Isaac nods, “Yeah, it’s an art history course Mr. Yukimura started. I think I’m going to enjoy it more than I expected.”

“That’s great, Isaac,” Scott says, still smiling.

Their moment of normalcy is broken, shattered by Stiles’ fast approaching form and his call of, “Hey!” Stiles skids to a stop next to them. “You! You two are coming with me. Come on.”

“We’ve got a free period,” Scott says, looking up at Stiles and squinting through the sun.

“So do I,” Stiles says, only a little bit out of breath. “And so does Theo Raeken.”

Oh, here we go.

—

“I was skating in a neighbor’s empty pool trying to do a handplant,” Theo says, standing in the locker room where they cornered him. “Nobody was home. I’m... not *that* good of a skateboarder, but I guess I was feeling pretty determined because I completely lost track of time. I didn’t even realize that it was night until the yard lights came on.”

Isaac spares a glance at Stiles, but Stiles doesn’t return the look. He’s focused in on Theo, paying attention to every word and every detail. He’s looking for holes in the story, for some sort of discrepancy to call him on.

“Like I said, I wasn’t very good,” Theo continues. “On my last try, I went down and hit hard. Really hard. I was sitting there at the bottom of the pool and I realized something...” Theo swallows. “I never heard the board come back down.” Theo’s eyes go distant, far away like he’s reliving the moment. Then, they go a little shiny as he says, “It came at me fast. I barely had a chance to turn around before it bit me.” Theo runs a hand along his side, “Right here.”

“Well, it wasn’t an accident. He wanted to turn you,” Scott says. He’s standing across from Theo. They’re speaking directly to each other while Isaac and Stiles are more on the sideline, involved in the conversation but a little less connected, a little more observational.

“Right, so, why weren’t you part of his pack then?” Stiles asks, arms crossed over his chest. He gestures, “Why – Why didn’t he come back for you?”

“Because by the time of my first full moon, he was dead,” Theo says, still addressing Scott more than anyone else. It rubs Isaac the wrong way, but he can’t put his finger on why.

“How did you know that?” Stiles asks. Everything about his tone is accusation. He’s listening to Theo, picking apart the story, but he’s not doing it with an open mind. He’s already set in his opinion.

“I met another one of his pack a couple weeks later,” Theo explains. “He told me the alpha that bit me was killed by two of his own betas. They were twins.”

That catches their attention. Scott looks over at Isaac and Stiles, recognition in his eyes. *Ethan and Aiden*.

“S-Scott, listen to my pulse, I’m telling you the truth,” Theo says, aware of the skepticism around him.

“Right. Or you just know how to steady your own heart rate while you’re lying your ass off,” Stiles says, pushing up off the lockers and taking a step toward Theo.

Stiles is blatant in his animosity, but Isaac’s not so sure that’s the best approach. Maybe Stiles is trying to make Theo nervous, trying to get him frazzled and defensive, trying to force him to make a mistake. Isaac thinks Theo’s more likely to slip up if they allow him to feel trusted. Let him feel comfortable, then he’ll grow confident, and that’s when he’ll fumble.

Scott levels Stiles with a look, one that's almost warning.

"Why would I lie?" Theo asks.

"Because maybe you're not who you say you are," Stiles asks. Isaac doesn't miss the way his gaze flicks down to his hands.

"Okay," Theo says, slow and uncertain. He turns back to Scott, saying, "In fourth grade, you had an inhaler. I had one too."

There's something about the way Theo says it. It sounds calculated. Isaac moves a little closer to Scott, wanting to get a better look at Theo's expressions – his eyes.

"I remember this day where I... ended up in the nurse's office with an asthma attack, a bad one. I was waiting to be taken to the ER, you were waiting for the principal." Theo says it almost like a question, like he's asking Scott if he remembers. "You told me what would happen when you go to the ER for asthma, how they give you oxygen and an IV of prednisone. You made it sound easy, like everything would be okay."

Isaac sees Stiles in his peripheral vision, head tipping back in exasperation. Stiles isn't swayed, but Isaac is. Just a little. He can understand Theo's perspective. He's been on the other side of Scott's unbelievable kindness more than once. It leaves an impression.

"I've been by myself this whole time," Theo says. Isaac can empathize with that too. He's not alone anymore, but he was for a long time. "Everybody knows that lone wolves... they don't make it on their own."

Isaac wonders how much of that is true now that Argent has changed sides and the majority of the hunters have gone dormant. And, the ones that do still exist – namely, the Calaveras – have their eyes set elsewhere, looking for bigger prizes like the likes of Kate Argent.

"I swear, I... I'm that same kid from fourth grade," Theo says. He's making purposeful eye contact with Scott, appealing to the compassion within him. "I was hoping you are too."

Isaac frowns. He doesn't know what to think.

The bell rings. Theo sighs, and says, "I better not be late to class." He looks at the three of them, smiling lightly, "You aren't the only ones I need to make a good impression on."

Scott smiles back at him. And then, they watch as Theo gathers his bag and exits the locker room. Once he's gone, they move in, gathering their own things and creating a tighter circle between them.

"Don't give me that look," Stiles says.

Isaac turns his attention over to Scott. His eyebrows are raised and chin tucked down just so, looking up at Stiles as if to say, *see*.

"We have to give people the benefit of the doubt sometimes," Scott says, not quite admonishing, but not wavering either.

"*Not* this time, all right?" Stiles says. Then, mind fully made up and voice full of conviction, "I'm right. There's something off about him. I can *feel* it."

Scott starts to walk away, saying, "Lydia's the psychic. Not you."

Instinctively, Isaac starts to follow, but he falters when Stiles doesn't move, only calls after Scott, "Lydia's not a psychic! She's a banshee, okay? There's a difference!"

Isaac stands between Scott and Stiles in more than just the literal sense. If Scott wants to give Theo the benefit of the doubt and Stiles wants to give him nothing, then Isaac falls somewhere in the middle.

Isaac doesn't think trust should be an automatic. Trust isn't guaranteed and it shouldn't be given so freely. Isaac thinks trust has to be earned. But, if that's the case, then they have to give Theo the opportunity to do so.

Isaac wants to give Theo a chance to prove himself. Until then, Isaac will remain skeptical but not certain.

—

Nearing the end of the day, Isaac makes his way to the library where the pack has plans to meet. Surprisingly, Isaac is the first one there, but he doesn't mind. He finds them a table and takes a seat. He has a handful of first day assignments he could work on, but he doesn't. Instead, he pulls out the bestiary.

He holds the leather book in his hands like it's something special and rare because, to Isaac, it is. He handles it with care, gently placing the book on the table, tracing over the edge of the front cover. Then, he flips it open.

There's so much here that, honestly, Isaac doesn't know where to start. So, he starts at the beginning, diving into a passage about adze.

Adze are vampiric beings. In the wild, they take the form of fireflies—

Isaac's done with fireflies. He's had enough neon-green glow to last him a lifetime. So, Isaac flips ahead, looking for an entry about one of the few supernatural creatures he actually has some knowledge of. He has plenty of time to scour the rest of the pages, but, for now, something simple seems fitting.

Except, as Isaac finds, nothing is simple. The first page he recognizes is titled with, *Banshee*. He expects the information there to be familiar, but, while some of it is, there's also stories that Isaac has never heard.

Banshees, also referred to colloquially as The Wailing Woman, are harbingers of death. These female spirits act as a bridge between the human and supernatural world. They themselves are not affected by that which affects the supernatural, but they carry abilities no human could.

The banshee is most known for her piercing scream, which can be heard for miles by other supernatural beings. When this scream is amplified, it has the power to tear through flesh and bone.

Banshees have a peculiar link to death, having the ability to sense when death is close, especially when the victim is someone they hold dear.

A banshee's ability to sense death and her weaponized scream makes her an adversary that should not be underestimated, even if she is only a young girl. Banshees have knowledge and power, and that makes them more dangerous than most. Banshees are closer to human than any other creature, allowing them to blend in. Sometimes, even the woman herself won't know of—

"Hey, Isaac," Scott says, jarring Isaac out of the page and making him jump just a little. Now, Isaac understands how he managed to sneak up on Lydia before. There's something so enchanting about the writings of the bestiary. The information there is compelling, but, even more so, is the blatant bias of the hunter perspective. The bestiary was an Argent family treasure, and that bleeds through the translation.

Scott laughs lightly as he falls into the seat next to him, "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. What are you reading?"

"It's the bestiary." Isaac watches Scott's eyes widen in surprise. Isaac

fiddles with the edge of the page, saying, “I borrowed it from Lydia.”

“Why?” Scott asks. “Is something going on? Is this about Derek?”

It’s not, but the question reminds Isaac that maybe he should read more about werewolves, maybe find something more about Derek’s new abilities. Though, that’s something for a later date. For now, he says, “No, no, everything’s fine. I just... I feel like I should know more about the world I’m a part of.”

“Oh,” Scott says, like a breath of relief. And then, he smiles. It’s warm and a little fond. “I think that’s a great idea.”

—

Slowly, more members of the pack join them. First, Malia. Then, a little later, Kira. All the while, Isaac stays buried in the bestiary, reading over entries about astomi, banshees, kanimas, and more. Isaac keeps reading until he’s disturbed again.

Stiles runs over to their table, slapping two sheets of paper on the wood surface.

“You found something?” Scott asks.

“Another signature,” Stiles says, smoothing down and straightening out the pages. “This is Theo’s dad’s signature on a speeding ticket from eight years ago,” he says as he points to the white sheet on the right. Then, he moves to the green, left side page, “Now, *this* is his dad’s signature on a transfer form to Beacon Hills High School from just a few days ago.”

“How did you get his transfer form?” Kira asks, brows furrowed in a soft sort of confusion.

“Did you break into the administration office?” Scott questions, and, this time, he is admonishing.

“No, I did not break into the administration office,” Stiles says, too offended for his own good.

Nobody believes him. Not even for a second.

They’re only looking at him, but Stiles almost immediately cracks under the weight of their four person disbelief. He rambles, “Okay, I might have broken into the administration office. Can we just *focus* on

the signatures? *Please.*” Stiles turns the pages for them to see better, and says, “They’re different.”

Isaac peers down at the two signatures. He wants to rally behind Stiles, wants to accept this new piece of evidence, but, looking at the pages, he just can’t do it. The signatures aren’t an exact copy, but there were eight years between the two documents and they’re similar enough.

“They’re... sort of different,” Malia says, trying to remain supportive.

“They’re *completely* different. Come on. Look,” Stiles says, sliding the papers over to Scott, clearly trying to convince him more than the others. “The garlands don’t match, the undulations of the sinuous stroke? Totally off. And, look, look at this,” Stiles points to the most recent signature, “perfect example of the criminal tremor.”

Looking at Stiles from across the table, watching him scramble to compile whatever shred of discrepancy he can find, it makes it all seem a little ridiculous.

“So...” Kira drags out, “Now, Theo is Theo, but his parents aren’t his parents?”

“Someone’s not someone. And when I figure out who that someone really is, someone’s in big trouble,” Stiles says. Though, he squints as he finishes, having enough self awareness to hear the jumbling of his words.

“But no one’s done anything wrong?” Scott says, like a question. He’s leaning back in his chair, pen tapping against the table. He looks perfectly calm, a complete juxtaposition to the erratic frenzy of Stiles.

“*Yet,*” Stiles stresses. “If Theo’s parents are both psychotic killers, then obviously we should *not* trust him, right?”

“My parents are Peter and the Desert Wolf,” Malia says. It’s a simple statement but it speaks volumes to overthrow Stiles’ stance.

“Yeah, and my dad was no saint,” Isaac says.

Kira raises her hand, “My mom summoned the nogitsune.”

“And we all know how you feel about *my* dad,” Scott says, inflecting his voice with just a smidge of comedy. Isaac knows what he’s trying to do, he’s trying to dilute Stiles’ intensity or redirect his energy onto

someone other than Theo. It's a good idea, but, unfortunately, it doesn't work.

"Okay," Stiles says, rubbing over his forehead and gathering up the paperwork. "It's fine. You know what? I'll just figure this out myself." He gestures with the papers, saying, "I don't need you. Or you. Or you. *Or you.*" The last point goes to Isaac, and it hits him like a physical thing. Stiles isn't finished though. He marches off, yelling, "I don't need anyone!"

There's a collective shush from the rest of the library, but Isaac hardly hears it. He's already packing up the few belongings that he had out on the table – the bestiary, a pencil, a sheet of paper. Isaac turns to Scott, and says, "I'm gonna go check on him."

Scott gives a nod of agreement, like he thinks that's a good idea. So, Isaac slings his backpack over his shoulder and takes up a quick pace out of the library. He spots Stiles slipping through the hallway, and calls out, "Hey, Stiles, wait up!"

Stiles looks over his shoulder and slows down, but he doesn't stop completely. He makes Isaac work for it, pushing past students with a little more ferocity than he would usually employ. And, as he reaches Stiles, Isaac huffs, "Do you know what the word 'wait' means?"

Now, Stiles does stop. He screeches to a halt, crossing his arms over his chest. "What do you want?"

Isaac sighs. "Come on, Stiles. You *know* that's hardly damning evidence."

"Maybe not," Stiles concedes, but he doesn't lighten and he doesn't let Isaac off easy. "But I thought you were on my side about this. Does that not matter when Scott's around?"

There's something hurt in Stiles' voice and Isaac really, really hates that.

"I'm not on anyone's side," Isaac says. It makes Stiles scoff. "No, really. I – I don't agree with Scott either."

"Either? So, you *don't* agree with me?" Stiles questions, turning less frustrated and more curious.

"Not fully," Isaac says. He doesn't explain further, but, feeling a little guilty, he says, "But I agree enough that I'll come with you."

Stiles smiles. It's not the full range of his happiness, not a toothy, goofy grin, but it's genuine. Isaac will take it.

Isaac shoots off a quick text to Derek, saying he doesn't need a ride and he'll be back home later than usual, then he follows Stiles out to the Jeep. Isaac hops in the passenger seat and Stiles sticks the keys in the ignition, but, before he can put the car in drive, there's a knock on his window. Stiles gives a startled flinch, losing his grip on the gearstick.

Stiles rolls down the window glaring at a slightly sheepish looking Liam. Liam drops the expression quickly, instead resting against the open window frame to ask, "So... what's the criminal tremor?"

Stiles flicks his gaze to Isaac, a question in his eyes. Isaac gives a small shrug, then leans over the center console, saying, "Get in."

Glad to be included, Liam smiles. It's this bright, happy thing. Stiles loses his annoyance at the sight. He sighs and waves Liam on, gesturing for him to go around. So, Liam does. He bounds around the front of the Jeep as Isaac slips his seatbelt off, getting out of the car long enough for Liam to climb in the backseat. Then, once they're all situated, Stiles pulls out of the parking lot.

"What's the plan?" Liam asks. He's one second away from vibrating right out of his seat. Isaac's not sure why he's so eager, but it's endearing.

"Well, Theo's mom picks him up from school, so we follow them and then... we stake out the house," Stiles says plainly.

"That's it?" Liam questions, sounding put off. "What if he doesn't do anything? We're just gonna sit in a car?"

"No one asked you to come, Liam," Stiles bites, a little frustrated.

Liam deflates, slumping back in his seat and appearing on the edge of offended. He mumbles, "I just wanted to help."

"Yeah, and no one else is offering, so we're very appreciative," Isaac says. And, pointed, "Isn't that right, Stiles?"

Stiles huffs. "Yeah, fine, whatever." Under his breath but loud enough for two werewolves to hear, he grumbles, "Even if it is tweedle-idiot

and tweedle-loser.”

Isaac turns back to look at Liam and, grinning, he says, “You’re definitely tweedle-idiot.”

They’ve been sitting outside Theo Raeken’s house for at least two hours. Isaac’s been doing his schoolwork and occasionally texting Derek, but he’s seriously at his limit. Theo hasn’t done anything even remotely menacing. Isaac’s stomach is starting to growl and the moon is rising and he wants to leave. Isaac is about ready to complain, talks of calling it quits resting on the tip of his tongue, when Theo walks out the front door.

“There! There he is!” Stiles exclaims, having absolutely no awareness of his rising volume.

“Shh!” Liam shushes him so Isaac doesn’t have to.

The three of them duck low in their seats, watching from around the corner as Theo puts what looks like a brown paper bag in the trunk of his car. He rounds the front of the vehicle and starts the engine. They wait until Theo has pulled out of the driveway. Then, they follow him.

For the entire drive, nobody says a word. The only sounds are the rumbling of the car and the rustling of their breath.

They stay muted as they arrive at the preserve, they stay muted as Stiles parks the Jeep a safe distance away, and they stay muted as they duck behind a pair of trees. And, from the makeshift hiding spot, they watch Theo exit his own car, opening the trunk and retrieving the aforementioned brown paper bag.

Theo starts in towards the heart of the preserve, and that’s when the silence breaks. Stiles says, “I told you he was up to something.”

Theo’s definitely doing something, but whether or not that something has evil intent... Isaac’s on the fence.

“We just spent three hours watching this dude play video games in his room,” Liam says, sounding exasperated. “He better be out here covering up a mass murder.”

Isaac scoffs a laugh, but Stiles isn’t joking around. He only says, “Let’s find out.”

And so, the three of them embark deeper into the preserve. They traipse through the woods, following Theo's scent *and* his footsteps. If this guy is covering up a murder, he's definitely not doing a good job of it. He doesn't seem to be trying for stealth at all. Something about that makes Isaac's nerves flare.

As they walk, Liam comes to a sudden and abrupt stop. Isaac and Stiles carry on a few more feet before they notice, swiveling around to face him. Liam's standing there in his hoodie, in the middle of the woods, looking younger than ever.

In the months since Mexico, Isaac has found himself forgetting Liam's age more and more, but, now, that's not the case. Now, it's impossible to ignore. He looks unsure and worried and so, so young. (And maybe that's unfair considering Liam is only a year younger than them, but, still.)

"What? What's wrong?" Stiles asks, circling back to approach Liam. Isaac does the same.

"I forgot, I – I was supposed to meet Mason at the school gym," Liam says, glancing behind him, almost like he wants to abort the mission.

"Okay, well, why don't you just tell him?" Stiles asks.

"Tell him what?" Liam asks. So unsure, so worried, so young.

"Anything," Stiles says, like it's simple.

Liam doesn't seem to agree. "Well, I *can't* just tell him anything."

"Why not?" Isaac asks, crossing his arms over his chest and tilting his head to the side.

"Because I haven't..." Liam flusters, hands thrown up and then shoved in his pockets. "I haven't told him everything."

"Still?" Stiles asks, more compassionate than Isaac has heard him all day. "We said it was okay."

"Yeah, I know, but it's not that easy. It—" Liam sighs. "It's a lot to accept."

"He watched my dad blow up a berserker with a landmine. I think the groundwork's been pretty thoroughly laid for acceptance," Stiles says with a little less patience, but still with kindness. "Scott and I, we've

been through this, okay? More than once. It's just – It's always better when they know."

Isaac remembers Young Derek, remembers that same argument, and he questions whether it's *always* true. Though, in this instance, Isaac's pretty sure it is. So, he says, "Besides, Mason's smart and he's got enough of the pieces that he's going to figure it out eventually. It's better if you tell him before that happens. He'd rather hear it from you."

Stiles and Isaac cap the conversation there, turning to continue their tracking of Theo. Liam, on the other hand, isn't quite done yet. Behind them, he continues to ramble, "But what if he freaks out? What if he doesn't want to talk to me? What if he tries to stab me with something silver? Or what if--"

Liam's words cut off, followed by a loud thud and the sound of branches snapping. Isaac and Stiles spin around, and, for a second, they see nothing but open woods. Liam has completely vanished.

Then, they spot the fresh dirt and the previously covered hole in the forest floor.

"What the hell are you doing?" Stiles demands.

Isaac looks down at Liam. He's standing in a deep hole, surrounded by mud and looking up at Stiles with something akin to contempt. For a brief moment, Isaac flashes back to the positions reversed. He flashes back to Kate Argent's grave, to falling in, to Derek standing over him.

"I sw..." Stiles' words fade into nothing. All at once, he goes perfectly still. Staring off into the distance, he whispers, "There he is."

Isaac follows his line of sight. As promised, Theo can be seen walking up ahead, form retreating and close to disappearing out of view.

Stiles isn't going to let them happen. He hisses, "Hurry up, stop screwing around." Then, he takes off after Theo, not waiting for Liam.

Isaac doesn't follow Stiles yet. Instead, he looks back down at Liam. And, because can't help himself, he says, "Need a hand?"

Liam doesn't get the reference, but he does accept the help. Isaac holds out a hand for Liam to grasp, pulling him up from the hole and trying not to remember lifting him from the well.

Once Liam is freed, the two of them easily catch up with Stiles, joining him in hiding behind a large, horizontal tree branch. There's a quietly babbling stream. Theo stands on the wooden bridge, watching as the water flows over rocks and carries away the first fallen leaves of the changing seasons.

He still doesn't look very threatening.

"Try and get his scent," Stiles says, speaking as hushed as possible.

Isaac breathes in past Stiles' usual anxiety and the mud on Liam's shoes, trying to trace Theo's scent through the overwhelming chorus of the woods. And, with practiced efficiency, he succeeds.

"Get anything?" Stiles asks.

"Soap," Liam answers before Isaac gets the chance. "It's nice. It smells good."

Isaac rolls his eyes. "His emotional state, tweedle-idiot." Then, he adds, softer, "He's sad. I think it's... grief."

Isaac dresses it up with uncertainty, but he *knows* it's grief. The scent has become achingly familiar in the last year. It's a unique sort of smell, different from most chemosignals. It's like rain or morning dew, but with something sour underneath. It's soft and harsh, sweet and bitter.

"Grief?" Stiles repeats, but it's barely a question and no one answers.

Silent, they watch as Theo plucks a flower from his paper bag. It's white – a lily, Isaac is pretty sure. Theo drops the flower into the stream with a faint splash. Isaac has the eerie, uncomfortable feeling of intruding, like they're witnessing something far less evil than they suspected. This seems private and intimate and not for the eyes of morbidly curious strangers.

Something thick rises in Isaac's throat. Something like guilt.

"Oh my god," Stiles squeaks with recognition. He turns, grabbing Isaac and Liam, whispering, "Go. We have to go."

"What? Why?" Liam asks.

"Go, right now, just go," Stiles says, pushing them away from the bridge with a sudden urgency.

Isaac and Liam don't protest (Liam's just along for the ride and Isaac is trying desperately to swallow against the emotion lodged in his throat). They let Stiles shepherd them away from the stream and back onto leaf strewn trails. They flee in complete and utter silence.

No one speaks again until they're at least ten feet away. That's when Stiles explains, saying, "That's the bridge where they found his sister."

The something thick turns to bile because Isaac remembers now. Isaac remembers Theo losing his older sister. It was less than a year before Camden.

"What sister?" Liam asks.

"The one that got lost and died of exposure," Stiles says, like Liam should already know this. "He's leaving a flower for her!"

And then, even worse, the bile turns to pity.

"Well, that doesn't sound evil," Liam says unnecessarily.

"I know," Stiles whispers with a frantic sort of energy, hands forming into nervous fists.

Isaac senses movement. Without thinking, he sticks an arm out in front of Stiles, bringing them to a rough and stumbled stop. Stiles makes a soft noise of protest, but it fades away in his throat as his eyes lift. Looming up ahead, there's a large tree and, standing on one of the branches, is Theo.

He's shrouded with a canvas of green leaves and night sky, staring down at them with an unreadable expression. And, in a dramatic entrance fit to rival Derek, Theo jumps to the ground in front of them. He lands in a crouch, slowly inclining his head. The rest of his body follows the upward movement, rising to stand. He looks at them, and, always grinning, asks, "What are you guys doing?"

Feeling threatened, Liam immediately growls. Stiles gets a quick arm around his middle, ceasing any attempts to lunge forward as Isaac hisses, "*Knock it off.*"

"Whoa," Theo breathes, hands raising in the universal sign of surrender. "Why do I get the feeling this kid's tougher than he looks?"

"Only when we let him off his leash," Stiles snarks, still crowded around Liam just a little, just to be safe.

“Stiles, we were in Little League together,” Theo says, as if it doesn’t take a huge leap in logic and conversation to get there, as if that means something. (It doesn’t. The greatest evils usually come from the people closest – Isaac would know.) “Why are you so suspicious of me?”

Stiles, having since released Liam, hesitates. He sighs a little, tilting his head back and forth, like he’s debating whether or not to take the plunge. In the end, he does. He pulls the folded papers from his pocket, holding them out to Theo and saying, “Cause of these.”

Theo opens up the forms. He separates the two sheets, comparing the white to the green, the left to the right.

“One’s a speeding ticket signed by your dad eight years ago. The other one’s a signature on a transfer form to Beacon High,” Stiles says. “They’re different.”

“Huh,” Theo says. Then, superficially, “Yeah, they... do look a little different.”

“No, they’re totally different. Signed by two different people,” Stiles argues, volume and irritation rising in minute but gradual intervals.

This is going too far. Isaac wants to put a stop to it, but he doesn’t know how.

“So, my dad’s not my dad?” Theo asks, laughing humorlessly and incredulously. “Like he’s an imposter?”

“Something like that,” Liam says, standing ground and staying loyal to Stiles. It would be more admirable if it were for a better cause.

Theo looks at them, skeptical and a little judging, though it doesn’t last long. He refolds the papers, gives a little shrug and a sideways smile to ask, “Who do you think I am?”

Stiles shakes his head. “We don’t know yet.”

“Want me to give you a DNA sample or something?” Theo asks. His smile grows a little wider. It makes Isaac feel cold around the edges. It makes him feel a little more certain that Stiles is right. Something is up with him.

“No, I don’t have anything from the fourth grade to match it to,” Stiles says, taking the joke more seriously than intended.

Theo's smile drops slow and steady, falling alongside his gaze, which drops back to the pages in his hands. "You know, Stiles, I came back here for Scott... but I also came back for you."

That brings Stiles pause. His eyes narrow.

"Someone like you," Theo says. "Someone who's willing to – to walk into the woods in the middle of the night to protect his friends. I don't have anyone like that... Scott does." Theo looks at Isaac. "You all do."

Isaac's pity grows a little stronger.

Theo is right. Isaac's life might be one disaster after another, but he's *lucky* because he doesn't have to face it on his own. Isaac knows what it's like to be alone. For a long time, he had *no one*. No real pack, no real friends, no real belonging. That changed, not only because of Scott, but because of Stiles. People like him don't come around often, especially not for someone like Isaac. But, somehow, by some miracle, Isaac landed himself a friend who would do just about anything for the people he cares about. He landed himself a friend who was willing to take a chance on saving him.

He landed himself a best friend.

"I know I'm in the right place," Theo says. "I'm meant to be here. I'm meant to be part of this pack."

Isaac doesn't know if that's true and he still doesn't trust Theo, but... nobody deserves to be alone.

—

When they return to the Jeep, someone is waiting for them.

Scott.

"Find anything?" he asks, standing by his motorbike and showing no outward signs of reaction.

"Nope," Stiles says. He avoids Scott's eyes, refusing to give him anything to work with, only storming over to the Jeep and slamming the door closed behind him.

Isaac doesn't follow. He stays still, only a foot in front of Scott, who levels him with this look that can only be classified as disappointment. Isaac feels another spark of guilt, but he chokes it down.

"I fell in a hole," Liam says, all too proud of himself. It cuts through some of the tension, bringing a slight smile to Isaac's lips as he clasps a hand on Liam's shoulder.

Then, he closes the short distance between himself and Scott. Isaac doesn't say anything, lets Scott be the one to break the ice.

"I thought you were just going to check on Stiles, not indulge him," Scott says. Isaac can't quite place the emotion of his voice. It makes his head spin. "Don't forget: we didn't trust *you* at first either."

It's a little bit of a punch to the gut. And, before Isaac can recover from the metaphorical doubling over, Scott walks away, approaching the driver's side of the Jeep. Inside, Stiles is struggling to get the engine to ignite.

"It was the bridge where his sister died, wasn't it?" Scott asks on the edge of rhetorical.

"Yes, it was. Very embarrassing. So, we're going to leave now," Stiles says. He tries the keys again, but the car won't start. Stiles lets go, eyes dropping closed and whispering, "Son of a..."

There's that pity again.

"Liam," Stiles calls, stepping out of the Jeep. "Just – do me a favor, get in the car and turn the ignition when I say."

Liam easily obeys, and Stiles circles the front of the Jeep, opening the hood with Scott trailing after him. As much as Stiles might want to, Scott isn't going to let this go. Though, Stiles doesn't make that easy either. He still isn't looking at Scott. It's a purposeful decision, one likely caused by spite and maybe even shame.

Isaac follows them towards the front of the Jeep, but hangs back a couple of feet. He doesn't know if he's trying to give them space or if he's trying to avoid attention.

If it's the latter, he fails miserably. For a moment, Scott just looks at him, unreadable expression carrying the same feel as his unreadable tone. Isaac wishes he'd be just a little bit straightforward.

"Stiles?" Scott asks, redirecting his focus to Stiles' turned back.

"Be with you in a sec," Stiles says, fiddling with the Jeep. Then, louder, he tells Liam to, "Try it!"

Liam does. The engine sputters, but doesn't come to life. It dwindles down to nothing and Stiles goes with it, hanging his head between his hands.

"Stiles?" Scott says again. This time, it's with a little less room for argument.

"Yes, okay," Stiles admits on an exhale. "We followed him out here. What do you want me to say? That I'm a stalker, huh? That I'm crazy, totally paranoid? *None* of this is new information!"

Stiles returns to the twisting of tools, still declining to look at Scott properly. And, what's truly heartbreaking, is that Stiles really believes all those things to be true. He really thinks he's irrational, really thinks people look at him and see crazy.

Isaac wonders if that started before or after the nogitsune. Then, he wonders which would be worse.

"You're not even gonna try to give him the benefit of the doubt?" Scott asks. Isaac has never really heard Scott speak like this, and *definitely* not to Stiles. He's monotone and quiet, but not angry. Or, at least, if he is, he hides it well.

Isaac doesn't know what to do. He's just standing there, watching a scene that's likely to blow up, not knowing how to diffuse it. He doesn't know what to do, so, as per usual, he does nothing. He just stands there.

"I give people the benefit of the doubt," Stiles says, still leaning on the Jeep but finally turning to look at Scott. "I've given *a lot* of benefit to *a lot* of people."

Stiles keeps toying with Jeep, trying to occupy his hands, trying to find an outlet for his restless energy. It's not working, Isaac knows. The instability around them is only getting worse.

"Like Derek?" Scott asks. "Kira? Liam?" And, a little unfair, "Isaac?"

Isaac swallows.

"I was right about Peter," Stiles counters. He pulls away from the Jeep, sparing Scott the quickest glance, then, "Try it again!"

The engine groans and whines but stays dead. Stiles tightens his lips in a line, rocking backward and forward just slightly, like he's holding

himself back. "You know," he says, "I bet you *still* think that there's something about him that can be saved."

Stiles looks back at Scott.

"Maybe," Scott says, and it's the wrong thing to say, but he won't lie. Not to Stiles.

Stiles huffs, slapping a hand on the Jeep and repeating, "Try it again!"

Liam turns the keys again, but, same as before, nothing happens. Stiles shakes his head, and Isaac knows he's reaching his limit. There's too much going on. Scott staying infuriatingly calm, the Jeep not working, Isaac and Liam watching, the lingering embarrassment of catching Theo at the bridge, the desperation to be believed. There's too much, and it's all going to come out. Isaac knows it, he just doesn't know when or how.

"Why can't you trust anyone?" Scott asks. His tone dips a little gentle, but it doesn't matter. It's the final blow.

"Because you trust everyone!" Stiles yells. And then, he punches the Jeep and shouts. Isaac can't tell which comes first, the impact or the cry, but it doesn't matter. The sound of the metal meeting hand is so loud it practically echoes.

The silence that follows is worse.

There's a brief moment, a collective wince of pure, stunned silence. Isaac flinches forward, an abandoned move towards Stiles. He doesn't know if he should regret not following through.

Isaac can see half of Stiles' face, he can see his lips shut tight and his eyes looking down and away to fight off oncoming tears. Isaac wouldn't blame if he cried, wouldn't fault him, wouldn't judge.

Isaac kind of wants to cry right now.

"Are you okay?" Scott asks. Again, his voice stays dull. Isaac knows why. Isaac knows he's hiding his own emotions, to control the wolf and to try to control Stiles, but it's having the opposite effect. It's adding fuel to Stiles' fire, adding to the invalidation and the doubt that started this in the first place.

"I'm fine," Stiles says. They all pretend they can't hear the skip in his heart.

“You could’ve broken it,” Scott says. And, for the first time, there’s a little bit of feeling in his voice. Concern, but also blame.

“It’s not broken,” Stiles says at once. He’s holding his hand out, shaking just so. There’s pain clouding him now, so strong it covers the scent of his anger and makes Isaac’s eyes sting a little more.

“Let me see it,” Scott says.

“I’m fine,” Stiles repeats.

Scott takes a small step closer, towards Stiles and his outstretched hand. Scott insists, “Let me see it.”

Stiles and Scott lock eyes. There’s a standstill pause. Then, slowly, Scott takes Stiles’ hand and Stiles doesn’t stop him. Scott’s fingers close around his palm and the shaking fades.

Isaac looks away then. He doesn’t want to see the transference of pain. He doesn’t want to see Stiles’ relief or Scott’s anguish.

Instead, Isaac casts his attention over to Liam. He’s still sitting in the Jeep. Isaac can see it in his eyes that he’s struggling to witness this too. He looks uncomfortable and twitchy.

Liam catches his gaze. Isaac gives him the smallest of nods, one that he wants to convey, *it’s okay*. Liam nods back. Isaac can’t tell exactly what it means – he’s not quite there yet with Liam – but he wants it to be something like, *okay, I trust you*.

The scent of pain dissipates and Isaac turns to Scott and Stiles again. Stiles is flexing his hand, rolling his fingers and testing the lack of hurt. His expression contorts into something conflicted. It lasts only a short moment before his brows soften and he drops his hand to his side. Isaac doesn’t know what the feeling is, but he doesn’t care. Just so long as it isn’t regret.

Stiles looks at Scott, and Scott looks back at him.

Isaac doesn’t know what passes between them. He’s on the outside looking in. Not always – sometimes he’s right there with them, but not tonight. Right now, in this very moment, Isaac is standing on the edge of something he’ll never know. It’s a friend turned brother, but it’s more than that. It’s someone known before and after and all throughout. Isaac doesn’t have anyone from before, he only has after. He doesn’t know what it is to have someone stick by him. Not the way

Scott and Stiles do. The bond is sacred.

Isaac doesn't know what passes between them. He can only hope it's understanding, empathy, forgiveness.

The Jeep starts.

—

Stiles drops Liam off first. Isaac gives him a sympathetic smile and a whispered, “*good night*,” that Liam doesn't return. Isaac knows Liam heard him, but he doesn't take the silence personally.

There's been so much silence today, and, as the night continues, it's turning suffocating. Stiles is driving Isaac back to the loft, and Isaac knows he has about fifteen minutes to open his mouth or risk things being ruined. Not for good, never for good with Stiles, but still ruined. And, even temporarily, that would be enough to destroy Isaac.

So, with nine minutes left, he finally says, “Is your hand okay?”

They're at a redlight, allowing Isaac to feel the full strength of Stiles' glare. “Yeah, no thanks to you. You could've backed me up, you know.”

“I know. I'm sorry,” Isaac says, genuinely. He does wish he had said something, done something. Maybe he wouldn't have agreed with Stiles wholeheartedly, maybe he wouldn't have backed him up in that way, but he could have prevented some of the damage. “I think it was hearing about his sister. It... It got in my head, and then I didn't know how to intervene, and I—”

“It's fine, Isaac,” Stiles says. “I get it.”

Isaac's not so sure he does. Stiles isn't angry anymore, but the way he says it is bitter and wounded, and Isaac hates it. So, he says, “No, you don't.”

The light turns green and Stiles returns his focus to the road, but he still says, “No?”

“I know exactly how it feels to lose an older sibling,” Isaac says, speaking even more slowly than is typical. He slides his lips together in a nervous habit. “It doesn't mean I trust Theo and it doesn't mean I don't think we should be careful, but I – I don't know. It changes things, and I can't explain why.”

“I’m telling you: *I get it*,” Stiles repeats. Then, he says something Isaac isn’t ready for. “When Allison’s mom died... it immediately changed our relationship in a way that I couldn’t explain. She did terrible things after it happened and I got caught in the middle of it all, but I never once blamed her. It’s this... unspoken connection.”

Isaac is caught off guard by the mention of Allison, but, ultimately, Stiles is right. He *does* get it. And he usually does. Though, even when he doesn’t, Stiles still tries to understand, he still tries to empathize.

Theo was right too – about Stiles being an amazing friend. Isaac needs to be better. He needs to be the best friend he can be to Stiles.

“It humanizes him, I think,” Isaac says. “But that hardly means anything. Humans are terrible creatures.”

Stiles hums, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. “I’m always right about these things.”

“Not always,” Isaac says. “If it were always, I wouldn’t be sitting in this car with you right now.”

Stiles sighs. “I never really thought you were *evil*.”

“Well, you sure acted like it,” Isaac says, but he’s not hurt or offended. It’s just an observation. Really, Stiles had every reason not to trust Isaac back then.

“You’re missing the point,” Stiles says. He sounds a little frustrated. “I’m *almost always* right, and *every time* no one listens to me.”

Isaac knows Stiles has a point. It’s eerie how good his intuition is, like he has a radar for deception. So, he says, “I’m listening.”

“Okay,” Stiles says. Then, “I mean, it’s like with Matt, right? Even now, Scott would say no one suspected him, but *I did*. I told Scott there was something fishy about Matt and I was right. There *was* something fishy about him. Or... something lizardy, I guess.”

“If that’s true,” Isaac says, “then we’ll keep an eye on Theo.”

Stiles parks outside the loft. He turns his body towards Isaac and asks, “Even if it means directly going against Scott?”

—

Isaac trudges up the loft stairs, too worn out to face the elevator. He’s

emotionally exhausted, feeling stretched thin and torn in two. It's been a while since Isaac felt like this, but he remembers it vividly. He remembers feeling stuck between Derek and Scott, between the two packs. In the end, something strange happened. Isaac managed to help unite the two groups.

Isaac's not sure he can pull that off again. Not when the two forces at work are Scott and Stiles.

Stepping into the comfort of home, Isaac crumples. He drops his bag off his shoulder and tries to let the world fall with it. He feels like his whole body has drooped, like he's giving out.

Derek doesn't say anything right away, just approaches, gently holding Isaac's arm and guiding him over to the couch. Isaac all but melts into the pillows. *He loves this couch.*

Derek waits until Isaac's eyes flutter open. Then, the hand on his arm slides up to the nape of his neck, resting there with fingers just lightly tickling his hair. Isaac feels so safe here. The tension is already seeping out of his limbs. Derek must sense it, deeming Isaac stable enough to ask, "What's going on?"

"Remember the other werewolf I told you about? After senior scribe?" Isaac cues. "Theo?"

Derek nods, "Yeah?"

"Well, Stiles is still convinced he's evil and Scott is still convinced he's not, and I..." Isaac sighs. He doesn't even know what to say. He doesn't know where to begin. "I'm just confused. I think."

"You *think* you're confused? You're not sure?" Derek teases, poking fun just a little, just enough to make Isaac's lips twitch.

"I know I'm confused," Isaac amends. "I just – I've never seen Scott and Stiles on the outs before. They... I mean they don't always agree, but it's never been like this. And I think I messed up, maybe?"

"Why do you think that?" Derek asks. He's being so kind and attentive. It makes Isaac swell with the warmth and joy of simple affection and quiet focus.

"I went with Stiles after school to spy on Theo," Isaac admits, only halfway contrite. "I thought either we'd find something and Scott would be glad I was there to protect Stiles *or* we'd find nothing and

Stiles would let it go.”

“But?” Derek prompts.

“But we found nothing and Stiles didn’t let it go and I think Scott hates me,” Isaac says, definitely a tad petulant.

“Can you explain?” Derek asks. (So unbelievably patient.)

Isaac pauses, trying to piece the words together in his mind. “We followed Theo out to the preserve, but he wasn’t doing anything suspicious. He was just leaving a flower for his dead sister.”

“Wait,” Derek says, interrupting a bit. “Is this Theo *Raeken*?”

“Yeah,” Isaac says. He should maybe leap up and grasp at the hint towards *more*, but he doesn’t. He stays relaxed, only asks, “You know him?”

“Not him,” Derek says. “His sister. Her name was Tara. She was the same age as one of my sisters.”

Isaac and Derek have so much shared loss. And yet, they rarely ever talk about it. Derek hardly mentions his siblings and Isaac hardly mentions Camden. Maybe they should change that, maybe they should turn the connection to one that’s spoken.

Maybe, but not tonight, Isaac decides. He just says, “Oh.”

Derek isn’t bothered by the plain response and doesn’t push the subject further. Instead, he asks, “So what happened after?”

“We went back to the Jeep and Scott was there waiting for us,” Isaac says.

“And what did he say?” Derek asks. His fingers are lightly stroking the ends of Isaac’s hair, providing an easy reassurance.

“Not much to me. He just... reminded me I wasn’t trustworthy at first either. But he and Stiles fought. I guess? I don’t know, it was more like Stiles was fighting and Scott just wasn’t reacting,” Isaac says. He sighs, subtly leaning back into Derek’s touch. “They’re just so opposite about trust. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

“Because you feel stuck in the middle,” Derek says. It’s not a question, it’s a statement of understanding.

“Yeah,” Isaac answers anyway. He frowns, “The thing is: they’re both wrong.”

Derek huffs a little laugh. “Oh?”

“Well, I mean, they’re both a little bit right and a little bit wrong. They’re just – They’re so black and white about everything and it doesn’t work like that,” Isaac says. He sounds frustrated, though he doesn’t mean to be.

“So, you’re the one who’s right?” Derek asks, smiling in that playful way.

Isaac groans, “No. Well, okay, maybe? I don’t know. Is that so bad? To think I’m right?”

“No,” Derek says, shaking his head. “You almost never do, so, just this once, I think it’s okay.”

Isaac doesn’t respond to that, just settles further into the couch, pressing Derek’s hand up a little higher into his curls. Isaac doesn’t mind it and Derek doesn’t either, if the way he gently twists a strand around his finger is anything to go by.

For a few minutes, neither one of them says anything. They just soak in the feeling of being close while digesting the day’s events and the information shared.

Though, eventually, that quiet has to end. It happens when Derek asks, “Did you tell either of them what you actually think?”

“I told Stiles a little bit,” Isaac says with a shrug. “Like, earlier, I implied I didn’t agree completely and then just now we talked about Theo’s sister and how it changes things for me.”

“But you didn’t talk to Scott?” Derek asks. He sounds a little shocked by the revelation.

“No,” Isaac says.

“I think you should,” Derek says, tugging harder on another curl. “You should call him like always and it’ll all work itself out.”

“You think so?” Isaac asks, even though that’s what Derek literally just said. Isaac feels safe behaving this way around Derek. Not younger, but just his real age. Isaac is still a kid, if only for a few more weeks in

the legal sense.

Derek nods, "Yeah, Isaac. I think so."

"And what about Stiles?" Isaac asks. "Nobody else really believes him."

"I think you just try to be as truthful as you can. When you agree, then agree. When you don't, then don't. You can't please everyone all the time," Derek says. "And if they're real friends, they won't expect you to."

Isaac knows Derek is right. He knows his friends are true, he knows they won't get mad at him for something as harmless as a difference of opinion, but it's hard. Isaac isn't good at sharing his own thoughts. He's trying to do better. And he is, at least a little bit, at least with Derek. It's maybe surprising that he's the easiest to share with when he used to break bones for contradiction, but that feels worlds away now, even if it was less than two years ago.

Isaac knows that his friends trust him. They trust him not to betray them, they trust him to be a decent person, they trust him to hold their secrets. *But* Isaac's not sure they trust his judgment. Isaac's not sure they would want him to be a guiding force in the decisions they make, and he understands why. Isaac understands that he's not good like Scott, or smart like Lydia, or perceptive like Stiles. Isaac is just Isaac, the boy with the twisted past and the twisted worldview to show for it. Isaac isn't—

"Just remember," Derek says, cutting through the swirl of thought, "all things considered, Stiles has every reason not to trust Theo." Derek pauses. "He might have been wrong about you, but he was right about me."

"He was *not* right about you," Isaac argues, but it's not brash or angry. It's just his opinion, simply stated and easily shared.

"He was at first," Derek says. "Just like you said, he was a little bit right and a little bit wrong. He was right not to trust me, but he was wrong that I was all bad."

It's nice to hear Derek say it, to admit out loud that he's a good person. Or, at least, not a bad one. It's progress, and Isaac can't judge the slow pace. He probably wouldn't be able to call himself a good person either.

“So, you gonna talk to Scott?” Derek asks.

Isaac nods, which, unfortunately, dislodges Derek’s hand in his hair. It makes Isaac’s nose wrinkle, nuzzling back into his palm. Derek laughs, light and fond. He lifts his hand to the top of Isaac’s skull, ruffling his mop of curls. “You’re doing good, Isaac.”

Isaac’s stomach tightens.

Derek ignores the reaction, and says, “Why don’t you get going before it gets too late?”

Isaac nods again, and, this time, he lets the movement break their contact.

—

Isaac quickly gets ready for bed, rushing and trying to keep his nerves at bay. He shouldn’t be this anxious. It’s only Scott. But Isaac can’t get that quiet disapproval out of his head, can’t stop his mind from leaping to the worst case scenario. Maybe Isaac *has* been spending too much time with Stiles, maybe Scott has noticed, maybe there’s abandon on his mind.

Or maybe Isaac just knows a good thing when he has one.

Maybe Isaac has lost too many people and refuses to lose any to something so simple, something that has gotten out of hand so quickly and inexplicably.

And so, Isaac hurries through his night time routine, and dials Scott’s number with a toothbrush still hanging from his mouth. He doesn’t expect Scott to answer after the first ring, doesn’t expect the soft, “*hello?*” to come so soon.

“Hi,” Isaac says, voice muffled around the brush. Then, even more garbled, “Hang on.”

Isaac holds his phone as far away from his face as he can, then spits into the sink, rinsing the toothbrush and his mouth with water. When he’s done, he puts the toothbrush in its holder, flicks off the bathroom light, and brings the phone back to his ear. “Sorry.”

There’s a breath of laughter. “*You couldn’t have waited another two minutes before calling?*”

"I wanted to catch you before you fell asleep," Isaac admits.

"I was waiting up for you," Scott says, and that shouldn't sound as heavy as it does. *"I wasn't sure if you would want to talk to me."*

"Why wouldn't I want to talk to you?" Isaac asks, finally slipping under his covers and into his bed.

"I don't know," Scott says honestly. *"I feel like maybe I wasn't very fair to you."*

Isaac's eyebrows furrow. "You barely said anything to me."

"That's what I mean," Scott says. *"I know how Stiles feels about Theo because Stiles never shuts up when he has a hunch, and I'm not saying that as a bad thing, it's just the truth, but you... you don't always speak up. I should have asked how you really felt."*

The response comes with an astuteness that Isaac doesn't usually associate with Scott. He's not necessarily surprised, he knows Scott is more than capable of emotional intelligence, but it still tugs him out of balance. He clears his throat, swallows, and says, "I don't fully agree with Stiles, but I don't fully agree with you either."

"Okay. That's fine, but what do you think? Not talking about me or Stiles, what do you really think about Theo?" Scott asks. His voice is even and understanding. He's listening, attentive and interested.

Isaac pauses. "I think I'm... apprehensive? I don't think he's evil, but I don't trust him either. I think anytime anyone new shows up, we have to be a little wary. It's just the safe thing to do, but *also*... we want to help people, which means we have to take a little risk. We have to give people a chance to prove themselves, one way or another."

Isaac holds his breath. He shouldn't feel this nervous. It's just Scott. If he doesn't approve, it's not the end of the world.

"That makes sense," Scott says. *"I know maybe I should be more jaded or less willing to trust, but I have to believe that people are good. How can I not believe it when so many of our allies used to be enemies? I mean... Derek, Argent, even you."*

Isaac smiles, "You and I were never really enemies."

"Maybe not," Scott says, *"but we didn't trust each other."*

It's the second reminder of the night. It stings a little. "I know."

"Just... I put you in a tough position and I'm sorry," Scott says.

"It's okay," Isaac says because he's tired and his bed is soft and he really feels that it's true.

"It's not. I don't – I don't want to steamroll you. I want you to know that I care what you have to say, and I want you to feel like you can disagree with me," Scott says.

"I'm not scared of you. If I'm scared to share my thoughts or disagree, then that has nothing to do with you, Scott. That's a me thing, and I'm working on it, but you've got to be patient with me. Okay? I—" Isaac breaks off.

"Okay," Scott says. He sounds relieved. *"That's good. I can be patient."*

Then, Isaac asks, "Should I be saying sorry? I feel like I need to apologize for going after Theo. I just... I couldn't let Stiles go alone and I don't trust Theo yet, so I thought—"

"It's okay, Iz. I understand. You're... You're not the one I'm disappointed in."

Isaac's heart drops. Scott might not be mad at him and Stiles might not feel betrayed by him, but this isn't over yet. Whatever's happening, whatever's brewing, it's only just begun.

Dreamcatchers

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 3

Word count: 9,206

Derek doesn't honk when he arrives. He doesn't text or signal his arrival in any way because he doesn't have to. He always arrives at least five minutes before Isaac's shift ends. Isaac knows because he recognizes the sound of Derek's car and the shape of his headlights. (So maybe they're a little codependent, but is that really so wrong? When for so long neither one had anyone to rely on, is it really so wrong that they have each other now?)

Derek doesn't have to honk, text, or signal his arrival because Isaac knows he'll be there. Derek will always be there.

And so, when his shift dwindles and the newest comics are shelved, Isaac enters the parking lot without hesitation. And, as expected, Derek's car is in its usual spot – center column and second row.

The sun has set, but only just. Isaac can still feel its warmth in the air, not yet taken over by the cold of darkness or the chill of autumn creeping in. It's not an overbearing heat, just a gentle warmth grazing his skin as he steps out of the shop and into the night. It's comforting, the kind of relief that the switch from AC to soft humidity brings.

Derek has the windows rolled down, soaking in the last drops of summer. He hears the shop door open and hears Isaac's feet on the pavement. He looks up with a private smile and, "Hey."

Isaac smiles back, but doesn't say anything. He rounds the car, listening for the quiet click of the door unlocking. He grabs the handle, slides inside, and then answers with his own, "Hi."

"How was your shift?" Derek asks.

Isaac shrugs, "Fine. Not many customers, so just a lot of reshelving."

"Are you hungry? I was thinking we could stop somewhere," Derek says.

Isaac nods, "Sure."

There's a simplicity in the exchange, and Isaac knows the warmth he's feeling is more than just the weather outside. It's coziness. It's a feather light softness tickling at his core and sparking a flare of *right*. Isaac revels in it.

There are greasy french fries and condensation dripping paper cups in Derek's car. Isaac doesn't comment on it. He doesn't mention the way Derek has gone lax since Mexico, like he's been holding his breath all this time, like he's finally exhaled.

Isaac doesn't mention it. He just enjoys the pay off, enjoys sitting in a parking lot with salt on his fingers and harsh carbonation in his throat.

"No, I'm telling you, every single shift, at least *half* the customers are looking to buy or sell Spider-Man comics," Isaac says, only a little bit complaining. "It's been like this since *The Amazing Spider-Man* movie came out."

"And didn't you and Stiles go see it twice?" Derek questions. His eyebrows are raised, teasing and knowing.

Isaac frowns, chewing on his straw. "Well, yeah, but that's only 'cause we got kicked out the first time."

Derek, apparently, hadn't known that. "Um. *What* did you two do?"

"Nothing!" Isaac defends. "We just – We couldn't stop laughing comparing The Lizard to the kanima."

"Idiots," Derek mumbles, but it's too fond to be anything but an endearment.

Then, in the blink of an eye, their moment of simplicity comes to an end. One second, they're laughing and enjoying each other's company. In the next, sirens are blaring in the distance.

Predictably, Isaac's phone immediately begins to buzz. It's a text from Stiles: **Crime scene downtown. Possible supernatural. Sending the location.**

Isaac looks over at Derek. He's got a few stray crumbs in his beard and his straw held halfway to his mouth.

“You’re gonna have to put that down.”

As the scene draws closer, the sirens get louder and the flashing lights get brighter. Derek pulls over, far enough away from the barricade and close enough to where Stiles ditched his Jeep. They rush over to the edge of the tunnel, passing the girls to join Stiles and his dad.

Stilinski huffs when he sees them, eyes practically rolling. “All right, guys, seriously? We don’t have to call in the cavalry for what might not even be a,” he leans in a little closer, hissing, “supernatural incident.”

Derek crosses his arms over his chest, leaning his weight back a margin. “Yeah, well, in Beacon Hills, it’s *at least* a fifty/fifty chance. Do you really want to trust those odds?”

“Come on, Derek,” Isaac scoffs in his laughter. “It’s ninety/ten and you know it.”

Derek looks like he wants to cuff Isaac on the back of the head, but he doesn’t. Instead, he narrows his eyes with a smile so devoid of humor it’s practically a grimace. He nods, and mouths, clearly unimpressed, “*Very funny.*”

The laugh it pulls from Isaac is a little more real, a little more open.

“Okay, I know it’s old news, but I will seriously *never* get used to this,” Stiles quips, finger wagging between Isaac and Derek.

Isaac looks away from Derek, finding the Stilinskis watching them with peculiar curiosity. A bit self conscious, Isaac changes the subject, “So, what’s going on here?”

“This kid, his name’s Donovan, he applied for the police force a few years back, but failed his psych eval. He’s been causing trouble ever since. We finally nailed him on some charges and he was headed to jail, but...” Stilinski motions to the flipped prison van behind him, “he never made it there.”

“He did this?” Derek asks, arms uncrossed and peering past Stilinski’s shoulder to get a good look at the crime scene.

“Maybe,” Stiles says, which Isaac knows likely means, *no*.

“And we don’t know if he’s supernatural?” Isaac asks.

“No, but, either way, we need to find him. Scott’s out looking for him right now,” Stiles explains.

Isaac nods. He understands the role he and Derek are meant to play: help Scott find Donovan.

Except, as they make to depart, the police radios come to life. For a moment, there’s just a static crackling of feedback. Then, there’s a short lived, cut off scream.

Anxiety swims in Isaac’s stomach.

“Scott, is that you?” Parrish speaks into the receiver on his shoulder.

Silence. It’s only a few seconds, but, as the group circles and the fear builds, it feels like an eternity.

“Yeah, I found Donovan,” Scott’s voice comes through, a little muffled but clear. *“He’s completely freaked out. He keeps saying some name.”*

Scott’s frantic, almost urgent, but not pained. He’s not hurt. His voice brings Isaac calm. His stomach settles.

Stilinski joins the conversation, clicking on his own radio, “What name?”

There’s a muted whisper at Isaac’s side, just a soft noise from Stiles’ throat, a quiet, *“Theo.”*

Isaac doesn’t look at Stiles, doesn’t draw attention, but he hears it. He hears the stubborn intuition, the hunch that Stiles won’t let go. He’s harboring it. Despite the absence of evidence, Stiles is *stuck* on Theo.

And yet, he’s wrong.

“Tracy,” Scott’s voice returns through the walkie. *“He keeps saying Tracy.”*

“Tracy who?” Stilinski asks, face contorting in confusion.

They don’t have to wait for Scott’s response. The answer is standing alongside them.

“Stewart,” Lydia says, grave in her intensity. “Tracy Stewart.”

The name hums in Isaac's mind, but it brings no recollection or familiarity. Unfiltered, he asks, a little brash, "Who?"

Lydia huffs, carrying an air of fabricated disappointment. "Tracy Stewart," she repeats, like it will somehow make Isaac remember. "She's in our graduating class."

"Okay," Isaac says, dragging it out.

Lydia spares a glance towards Parrish. He flicks his chin up in a nod of support. "Tracy went to see my mom last week," she begins. "She told her about a nightmare she had, one where birds were pecking at the skylight in her bedroom. And, in the middle of telling the story, she puked up black feathers and blood." Lydia gestures to Parrish, "When we went to check it out, her roof was covered in dead crows."

"Did you say Stewart?" Stilinski asks, breezing past the alarming retelling as a realization builds.

Lydia nods, movement slow and eyes wide.

"Her father was in the prison van," Stilinski says. "The only fatality."

"Does that make her a suspect?" Derek asks. He's talking to Stilinski, but he's looking at Isaac.

"Not without probable cause," Stilinski says.

Grab the chains.

Isaac swallows. He blinks hard, trying to force the voice from his mind. On instinct, he takes a sharp step backwards, body screaming at him to get away. Get away from Stilinski and Parrish. Get away, get away, get—

In the damn freezer!

Isaac bumps into someone. He jerks, turning fast, panic still shrieking in his bones. Isaac spins and he finds the source of impact. His eyes glide right past the handcuffed stranger. He sees only Scott.

Brown eyes meet blue, and then *quiet*. A switch is flipped and everything goes mute. The world, his mind, his bones. It all fades and stills.

Quiet.

—

The bestiary needs an index, Isaac's decided. He's been flipping through its pages for at least fifteen minutes, but it's so easy to get lost in were-this and were-that. It also doesn't help that Derek's eyes haven't left his skin since they came home.

"Stop monitoring me," Isaac says, not looking up. "I'm fine."

"You freaked out," Derek says, unapologetic and objective in fact.

"For, like, thirty seconds," Isaac says. "You're the one who asked the stupid question."

"So, it was about your dad?" Derek asks, like he's searching for clarification.

Isaac looks up now, eyes narrowing, "What else?"

Derek shrugs.

"Well, I'm fine," Isaac sighs. He sounds a little combative, but he doesn't mean to be. He doesn't mind the concern, not really. It's kind of nice, knowing how much Derek cares. With that in mind, he adds, "Just – Sometimes I forget things. Like, I don't spend my free time thinking about my dad or the freezer or being a fugitive. So, when something reminds me, it just..."

"Knocks you back a step," Derek says, nodding. "I know. I get it."

Isaac nods in return.

"What are you looking for?" Derek asks, mercifully changing the subject, at least for now.

"Lydia leant me the copy of the bestiary she made," Isaac says, lifting the book. "I'm looking for mentions of black feathers, but I've basically already read the whole thing, and there's been nothing like that so far."

Derek walks over, getting a closer look at the leather bound book. "Lydia leant you this? Before tonight?"

Isaac nods again. "Yeah, last week."

"And you've been reading it? Just for the fun of it?" Derek asks.

Isaac releases a puff of air, a little noise of mock offense. “Not *just* for the fun of it. I’m researching.”

“Hm,” Derek says, monotone and simple. “So, you really are interested in learning about the supernatural?”

“Yes,” Isaac says. He feels a little shy about saying it, though he doesn’t know why. It’s only Derek and it’s only the bestiary. It shouldn’t be a big deal.

“Why?” Derek asks. He’s still standing over Isaac, on the other side of the coffee table.

“I don’t know,” Isaac shrugs. He pulls the bestiary onto his lap, hands fiddling together. “It started when you were losing your powers,” he says. “I didn’t want to feel so dependent on others. I wanted to take back control. I wanted to be ready, I wanted... I wanted to help.”

Derek smiles at him – the proud smile, the one that makes Isaac’s heart clench. Then, “I think I might have some books for you.”

—

Sand fills Isaac’s throat. He’s clutching Derek’s bloodied center, trying to say the words, but there’s a desert lodged in his throat. It’s filling Isaac up. It’s in his lungs, in his chest, in his esophagus, in his bones. There’s sand everywhere. Isaac can barely see, can barely hear, can barely breathe.

Sand is choking Isaac and Derek is slipping away. He’s slipping through his fingers, he’s dying, he’s saying goodbye.

Isaac can’t say it back. He can’t say it back. This is his one chance, Derek is right there. Isaac has him in his reach, he has his dying breath, but Isaac can’t say it back. He’s coughing and choking and trying to force the sand from his body, but he can’t.

Isaac’s hands are crumbling now. His fingers go first, turning to dust and disappearing in the wind. He’s being blown away, the sand is taking over. Isaac can’t breathe, he can’t hold on, he can’t say it back.

He can’t. He can’t. He can’t.

Isaac’s body wakes. His upper body lurches forward, leaning over the side of the bed before his mind can catch up. He’s coughing violently, phantom sand still lodged in his throat. He can still feel it, drying him up and shriveling inside.

"I love you."

Isaac's mind wakes. He stops coughing. He quiets the choking fit and rolls onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. There's sweat and tears on his face and skin, soaked through his t-shirt and his pillowcase.

Isaac throws the shirt off and flips his pillow, but he doesn't leave his bed.

He still wants to cough. He still wants to expel the sand from his lungs, still wants to bleed himself dry to cleanse it from his veins. He does neither. He doesn't cough and he doesn't scratch.

Instead, Isaac reaches for his phone. He calls Scott.

"Isaac? You okay?" Scott's voice is groggy and thick with sleep. Isaac feels a little guilty, has no idea what time it is, but, mostly, he just feels soothed.

"Yeah," he lies. His throat feels scratchy and it warps his voice. Isaac wonders if he was coughing in his sleep, if he was choking himself with fear.

Scott doesn't call him on the lie. He never does when it's this late, when they both know why he's calling. *"Okay. Another nightmare? It's been awhile since the last one."*

Scott's only kind of right. It's been a month since Isaac last called him like this, but it hasn't been a month since his last nightmare.

The dreams aren't always the same, but this one is the most frequent. Isaac has gotten used to waking with his throat constricted and his body gasping for air. He's gotten used to the compulsive coughing, and, it seems, Derek has too. Isaac knows he's awake, he can hear the stutter of his heart rate rising, but there's no rustling of sheets or indications of movement.

There's a routine now. Isaac always calls Scott when he has a nightmare about Derek.

The others – the twisted stories of freezers or graves or daggers – will bring Isaac to his feet and down the spiral stairs. But this, the sand in his lungs and the words on his lips, will bring Isaac's phone to his hand. He can't face Derek right away.

The first time, when Derek ran up the stairs so fast he almost tripped,

Isaac nearly tore himself apart. Seeing Derek brought the desperation crawling up his throat, and he coughed and hacked and screamed the words until blood ran from his lips.

So, Derek stays still. Because, as much as it pains him, he knows what's waiting upstairs is worse.

"Isaac?"

"Yeah," he says. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Scott says. *"Gonna put the phone on speaker?"*

"Yeah."

They have a routine for this too. They go through the motions of hello and what's going on. Then, Isaac rests his phone in the middle of his chest and puts it on speaker. On the other line, Scott does the same.

With the volume turned all the way up, Isaac can hear Scott's even breaths and steady heartbeats. With the volume all the way up, Isaac can *feel* the sound vibrating through his phone and into his chest. It's a gentle weight at his center, a thrum through his bones that breaks up the dry sand and melts away the wild words.

The second time Isaac had the nightmare, it was an accident. Isaac woke coughing and grabbed his phone, but he was shaking so hard and so slick with sweat that he couldn't get a good grip. He dropped his phone to his chest and left it there.

It worked then and it's worked every time since. Tonight will be no different.

—

Isaac and Derek don't talk about the nightmare. The closest they get is the mug of tea, swirling with honey and a small hint of lemon. By now, Isaac's throat has healed during the night, but he still feels wilted and brittle. The warmth in his hands and throat is enough to loosen his shoulders and bring the words to his lips.

They don't talk about the nightmare, but, when Isaac finishes the tea, Derek takes the mug and Isaac whispers, "I love you."

Derek doesn't say it back, but only because Isaac doesn't really want him to. Isaac just needs to dislodge the words, just needs to clear them

from his airway. He just needs Derek to know.

Derek will sometimes nod, will sometimes smile. And, sometimes, like today, he doesn't give any outward signs of acknowledgement. He just presses forward like the words didn't reach him. But Isaac knows they did because, inside, he hears Derek's heart skip.

Isaac ignores it.

They don't talk much at all the next morning. Not until they pull up at the school, and Derek says, "I'm going to meet Stilinski at the station. He wants my help with Donovan since we still don't know if he's supernatural. I'll keep you updated."

Isaac nods, "Okay."

"But I'll pick you up after school, yeah?" Derek asks.

"Yeah," Isaac agrees. "I guess we might be trying to track down Tracy. I'll let you know if I don't need the ride."

"All right," Derek says.

They're sitting in front of the school and Isaac has every reason to get out of the car, but he doesn't. Derek's fingers are drumming on the wheel, slow and even taps, a nervous tick that doesn't come out very often.

Isaac sighs. "You can say it."

Derek shakes his head. He keeps his lips shut and doesn't say another word.

Isaac doesn't really understand the move. He's given Derek permission. The words must be eating at him the way they were eating at Isaac, but Derek stays silent and Isaac doesn't push. Instead, he just shrugs and opens the car door.

As it's closing behind him, falling shut with a thump, Isaac hears a whispered, "-you too."

Isaac smiles to himself.

He turns to face the school, ready to head inside, but he's met with Scott instead. He's walking over with a forced kind of nonchalance. He looks tired, and it tugs at Isaac's remorse. (He doesn't often feel guilty immediately after a nightmare. He's too tired, too distressed, too in

need of comfort. But the next day, the guilt is a heavy burden on his shoulders, an awkwardness he can't quite shake.)

"Hey," Scott says, tugging on his backpack straps. "How're you doing?"

Scott always asks. He never lets the nightmare go unspoken, but he doesn't drag the details up to the surface either. He keeps things light, giving Isaac the opportunity to talk only if he wants. He always opens the door, he always checks, but he doesn't force.

Isaac's small smile hasn't dropped yet, but it's becoming a little strained. Still, he shrugs, "I'm fine."

Scott nods.

Isaac takes a deep breath, so full it's almost painful, just to say, "Thank you." It comes out thin and taut and Isaac almost wants to cough, but he buries the urge.

Scott's expression twists into something gentle and kind, just on the right side of pity. "It's okay. I tell you every time: you don't have to apologize and you don't have to thank me. You always answer when I call you too, you know."

Isaac frowns. Scott has only called to wake Isaac once before, one nightmare and one heartbreaking sob. He couldn't even look Isaac in the eye the next day and he never called again. Isaac doesn't wish more nightmares on Scott, but he knows they haven't stopped. He knows Scott is still plagued with berserkers and alphas. Isaac wishes Scott would call again, just so Isaac could try to help, just so he could tell Scott, *it's okay*. The same way Scott always does for him.

Isaac doesn't mention any of this. Well, not really. What he says is, "I'm always going to answer."

"But you're always going to say 'sorry' and 'thank you' too?" Scott questions. He's got a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Mhm," Isaac nods, lips pulled in a flat line. "Yep. Sorry. Nothing you can do about it."

Scott breathes a soft, breathy laugh. "Right. Well, I just wanted to check on you."

"I know," Isaac says.

For a moment, they just stare at each other. Like this, Isaac can hear Scott's breath and heartbeat. He can see the rise and fall of his shoulders and chest. He can't feel it, but that's okay. In the light of day, with the faint taste of lemon still resting on his tongue, just seeing and hearing is enough.

"Um," Scott says. "The others are waiting for us. To talk about Tracy."

Isaac would really rather not talk about Tracy, but he doesn't really have a choice. She needs their help, in one way or another.

—

"Tracy wasn't just having trouble sleeping," Lydia says, pacing just a little. "It was a real disorder. It was night terrors."

"Well, now *she's* the night terror, especially since no one can find her," Stiles says, hands circling in a repeated motion.

Scott's still looking at Isaac. Isaac's pretty sure he only stopped long enough to walk to the Jeep without falling on his ass. He can't decide whether he's annoyed by it or not. (If he's annoyed, it isn't by much. He did choose to stand between Liam and Lydia, practically right across from Scott, practically right in his line of sight.)

"Okay," Scott says. "I know we're all tired and miserable..." he looks to his right, "except for you."

Mason stands beside Scott, leaning one elbow on the Jeep and pressing his weight forward. His eyes are wide, darting back forth in unbridled wonder and fascination. When his eyes flick to the side, meeting Scott's gaze and realizing the comment is pointed towards him, his posture slackens and he falls back, but only barely.

"Oh. I'm sorry," Mason says, twisting fully towards Scott. "This is all just," his hand waves near his face, fingers and palm stretched out, "mind-blowing."

He's met with unimpressed stares all around. To Isaac's left, Liam looks like he wants to be back in that hole in the ground right about now.

"You're a kitsune," Mason says, gesturing towards Kira. He practically glimmers with intrigue and enthusiasm. Unable to fight his smile, he exclaims, "I don't even know what that is!"

“I’m still learning,” Kira says.

“Liam,” Stiles says, turning on the beta with irritation, “we said you could tell him, not invite him to the inner circle.”

“Uh, I’m in the inner circle?” Mason asks, body stretching up, like he’s growing with the possibilities.

“No!” Liam and Stiles answer in unison, crushing Mason back down to human heights. Though, honestly, it doesn’t do much to dampen his excitement.

The innocence almost makes Isaac sad. He ignores the feeling, made much easier when Scott cuts in with, “Look, back to Tracy. She’s just one lone wolf. We can find her.”

“One lone serial-killing wolf,” Malia says.

“Uh, she only killed one person, you know?” Stiles corrects. “The other two were mauled.”

Isaac’s trying not to think about Tracy killing her father. He’s trying not to wonder whether he deserved it. He’s *trying* to remind himself that no one deserves to die.

“What do we do when we find her?” he asks, attention flitting between Scott and Stiles.

Malia answers instead, “I say we put her down.”

Silence follows.

Isaac looks around at the group. Everyone is quiet, but their expressions speak volumes. Stiles, Liam, Kira, Lydia – *everyone* seems to want to agree. They just won’t say it out loud.

Isaac doesn’t know what to do with that. He doesn’t know what to do when he seems to be the only one who wants to *object*. The only one who wants to try to help her.

Then, across the Jeep, eyes still bugging out and mouth gaping open, Mason breaks the silence, “*Intense.*”

Scott dutifully ignores him, “Guys, let’s concentrate on catching her first. We’ll figure out the rest later.”

It’s easy with Scott. It’s very rare to be surprised by Scott’s stance. His

morals are firm and predictable. He's not going to kill Tracy. He's not going to take the easy way out. He's going to try to save her.

And he's going to rope them all into helping, whether they want to or not.

—

Isaac arrives in Art History before Lydia. He takes up his seat and pulls out a book. It's one from Derek, though it's not exactly what Isaac expected it to be. He was expecting fragile binding with torn pages and dust settled in the spine. Instead, the book is nearly pristine.

"Laura was something of a collector," Derek had said. "She always wanted to know more. It's what made her such a good alpha."

The books in Isaac's room – the ones he tried to use to learn more about La Iglesia and the berserkers – were ones left behind by Peter, salvaged from the Hale house or taken from the vault. They were sentimentals more than anything.

Most of the real books, the ones with real value and real information, were stored back in New York. Derek said he was nervous to have something so special shipped here, but it was about time he looked through Laura's things.

Isaac hadn't really known what to say to that, but, when Derek retrieved the select few books he *did* have here in Beacon Hills, Isaac accepted them gladly with promises to be gentle.

And so, Isaac stays true to his word. He keeps one book tucked carefully into the pocket of his backpack while the others remain at home, on top of the overcrowded bookshelf. This one, the book Isaac brought with him, is the most general of the selection, the most similar to the bestiary – minus the hunter bias.

Isaac's still searching for something to connect the black feathers to Tracy. At the moment, the consensus is werewolf, considering the claw marks found on the victims of last night's attack. But there's something peculiar about the night terror turned reality. Sure, Isaac doesn't doubt that, in a fit of bloodlust, a werewolf *could* kill and eat a bunch of crows. It's just... odd.

Isaac doesn't know exactly what he's looking for. He's just trying to fill in the gaps. He's just trying to help. He's trying to distract his

racing mind.

Lydia walks in. She comes down the aisle, pausing beside Isaac, leaning down close enough to get a look at the book. Then, she stands up straight, arms folding. She narrows her eyes, mouth sliding into a close-lipped, lopsided smile. “Huh.”

“What?” Isaac asks, squinting back at her.

She shakes her head, moving to sit behind him as she says, “You never cease to surprise me, Isaac.”

—

The lack of sleep is getting to Isaac. It was only one night of poor rest, but his brain feels like it’s melting out of his skull and this boring English lecture is really not helping.

He’s about two seconds away from an embarrassingly loud, head dropping to desk moment when his phone vibrates in his pocket. It jolts Isaac into focus. Slowly, to avoid the gaze of their teacher, Isaac pulls his phone out.

The screen reads: **Tracy’s at school. Mr. Yukimura’s class.**

Isaac looks to his right, finding Stiles with his phone out. Though, in the way he’s leaning forward to show Malia is anything to go by, he has a lot less care for being caught than Isaac does.

Seeing that Stiles and Malia are already in the loop, Isaac doesn’t feel the need to wait. He stands abruptly, grabbing his bag and the attention of the teacher and students around him. He doesn’t give an excuse. He’s too tired and stressed to think of one. So, he just strides forward and right out of the classroom, ignoring the calls of, “Mr. Lahey!”

The fire alarm begins to blare, but Isaac ignores it, recognizing the sound for what it is – a distraction and a safety precaution.

Isaac books it towards the history classroom. Even as students flood around him, Isaac pushes his way against the current until, eventually, he makes it to the open doorway of Mr. Yukimura’s room.

Scott, Liam, and the teacher stand at the front of the nearly empty classroom. At the back, stands a barefooted Tracy. Her hand is gripped over an innocent teenager’s arm, tight enough to draw blood and soft

sounds of pain.

“Tracy,” Scott says, slowly approaching like the wild creature that she is. “Tracy, let go.”

Isaac inches closer, step by step. He can’t move any faster. He wants to help Tracy, but he can’t risk the life of the second girl. He can’t risk triggering an outburst. Not when the blood is beginning to drip to the floor, not when Tracy’s eyes are far away and distant.

Isaac doesn’t recognize her, but he recognizes that look. She’s not really here with them. Something is clouding her mind.

Tracy drops the girl’s arm.

“They’re coming for all of us,” she says. She’s swaying on her feet, a single bead of sweat crawling down the bridge of her nose.

Then, both inevitable and unexpected, Tracy tips forward. Gravity pulls her to the ground. She goes limp like a rag doll. Her eyes don’t close, they stay misty and unreachable. Her mouth falls open.

Liquid silver spills from her lips.

A melted mirror pools on the ground around her, reflecting under fluorescent lights and seeping on dull floors. It shines on the corners of her mouth, sticking and staining, unnatural and out of place. It pours even and glossy, too smooth for something so wrong.

Scott rushes forward, crouching down beside her while trying to avoid the spreading substance. He leans in close, head tipped, and Isaac knows what he’s listening for.

“She’s still breathing,” Scott says, looking up. Then, eyes finding Isaac’s for the first time since his entrance, “Help me get her up?”

Isaac nods and moves forward, cutting through his static and stunned pause. Isaac steps around the glimmer of silver, helping to steady Scott as he scoops Tracy into his arms. Then, once stable, they race out into the hallway.

Isaac stays close to Scott and Tracy. He’s not sure which one he’s more worried about protecting.

Stiles and Malia finally join them, rounding the corner into the hall. Stiles comes to a briefly skidding stop, but it doesn’t last long. He

quickly gets with the program, switching gears and turning towards the closest exit with Malia on his tail. The two of them pull the doors open for Scott and Isaac to rush through, taking care to keep Tracy balanced and safe. Then, Malia and Stiles follow them out of the building, leaving Mr. Yukimura and Liam to stay behind on damage control.

The four of them don't say anything until they've piled into the Jeep – Stiles and Malia in the front, Scott and Isaac in the back with Tracy awkwardly propped between them. Only then, only when they're settled and pulling out of the parking lot, does Stiles say, "Hey, Isaac?"

"Yeah?" he answers. He doesn't look up, doesn't want to take his eyes off Tracy and Scott.

"Don't tell Derek anything yet," Stiles answers. It's not what Isaac was expecting. "It's just – He's with my dad at the moment, and we need time to figure this out before he swoops in and arrests her."

Maybe surprisingly, Isaac doesn't put up a fight. He just says, "Yeah, okay."

Isaac doesn't like the idea of keeping Derek out of the loop, but he'll understand. He'll understand why Isaac wants to protect Tracy. He'll understand why Isaac couldn't tell him.

He'll understand. He has to.

—

Tracy lays on the table of Beacon Hills Animal Clinic. (Maybe they should change the name. It's a bit misleading.)

Deaton pulls Tracy's eyelids back, revealing faded brown irises. He shines a flashlight. "Pupils dilate under normal conditions."

The metallic sheen remains at the corner of Tracy's open mouth. Her breaths come heavy through her lips, labored and strained.

"Heart rate is 250," Deaton says, two fingers on her pulse.

It's not just the silver painting Tracy's features. Her skin is wet with sweat, beads dripping on her face and jaw and forehead. It shines under the light of the clinic, clammy and pale and weak.

Deaton slides back the neckline of Tracy's sweater, revealing more damp skin and a twisted red scar where neck meets shoulder. That shouldn't be there. Any scars earned should have healed through after the bite. Still, Deaton says, "Evidence of an allogenic skin graft on the right shoulder."

Scott leans in a little further, getting a closer look.

"Now, this silvery substance at her lips," Deaton directs the flashlight to Tracy's mouth, "is not something I've seen." He glances at Scott, "It almost looks like mercury."

Tracy's body jolts. Her eyes stay closed, but her shoulders jerk, a ripple of movement shuttering through her limbs.

"Uh..." Stiles notes.

"Can't you just give her a shot of something?" Malia asks.

"She doesn't look to be in any pain," Deaton says, looking up at Malia. There's a tint of confusion in his voice.

Frank and unapologetic as ever, she counters, "I meant a shot to kill her."

Something ugly buckles in Isaac. Sharp and bitter, folding in on itself and making Isaac feel small. Compassion, sympathy, *pity*.

Deaton clicks away the glow of his flashlight. "I generally prescribe to a code of ethics that frowns on such measures."

Malia's expression doesn't change much. It's just a flick of her eyes towards Tracy, a softening of her brows. But Isaac sees something else, sees traces of his own pity in the unwrinkling of her glabella.

"Malia, you know we're not going to do that," Scott says.

A quiet sigh escapes her, air catching in her throat for only a moment. There might be sympathy inside, but Malia's self preservation instinct is stronger. "How do you know she's not going to kill us?"

"She makes a decent point," Stiles gestures towards Malia. (The crease between her brows returns. Maybe it's not self preservation. Maybe it's protection.) "Either way, eventually, I'm going to have to let my dad know she's here."

Stiles' eyes drift to Isaac.

Isaac has never been the best at deception. As hard as he tries to keep his heart in a cage, it always ends up on his sleeves. But this? This is ridiculous. One misstep last night, and, now, everyone is keeping tabs on him. It makes Isaac feel like a kid again. It makes him feel exposed – *vulnerable*.

Or, maybe it wasn't Isaac's fumbled retreat. Maybe Stiles just recognizes the situation for what it is: an eerie familiarity, a parallel line. A mishandled tragedy of the past and an opportunity to course correct.

History repeating.

"Agreed," Deaton notes, pulling Isaac out of his head and back into the present. "And, while I may argue against euthanasia," a pointed look towards Malia, "I'm not opposed to a little..." Deaton reaches behind him, "extra security."

The vet retrieves a glass jar, holding it up to reveal a label marked with the Ogham letter for *L* or *rowan*. Then, Deaton unscrews the lid. In a fluid motion, he tosses out the glittering dust from within. It flows through the air as a single entity, bound by laws unexplained by human science, moving as a united being.

It falls to the floor just the same.

Isaac feels it at once. The barrier forms, and the air *sparks* with energy. It hums around them, grazing Isaac's skin and scenting the room with ozone. It's like stepping into a vacuum. Sensation goes muffled and everything dims.

The power inside Isaac intertwines with invisible binds. The two forces rope together, looping and knotting and straining. His power isn't gone or weakened. It's just useless. It's just stuck.

They're trapped.

—

Stiles keeps staring at the line of mountain ash. His anxiety mixes with the crackling of the barrier, whirring in distress and igniting Isaac's nerves. There are no walls enclosing, no metal chains rattling, no reasons for claustrophobia. But Isaac has been on edge all day. He's already restless. He already feels like he's standing on a bear trap, one move away from setting it off.

So, Isaac can't add Stiles' anxiety to the equation. Not when it's this contagious.

"Stop worrying," Isaac mumbles.

Stiles pulls his eyes away from the line of ash, gaze turning to the right. He doesn't look at all surprised to have garnered Isaac's attention. He doesn't look apologetic either. He's surveying, searching and assessing. Isaac lets him.

"Tracy won't be able to cross a line of mountain ash," Deaton interjects. "She's not going anywhere."

Stiles makes a small noise, almost a hum. "That's kind of what I'm afraid of."

"Well, you and I will be able to get out of here no problem," Deaton says, a reassurance so weak it's almost mocking. Then, to the werewolves, "You three, not so much."

Stiles looks at Isaac again. There's a silent question in his eyes.

Isaac nods. He knows what Stiles is asking, but he's not quite sure what his own answer conveys.

—

"Scott, Isaac, would you mind holding her down?" Deaton asks. He picks up a scalpel. "I'm going to be trying a few more... invasive tests."

Scott and Isaac lock eyes. There's a brief moment of uncertainty, and then a mutual agreement. They take up either side of Tracy, hands pinning to her shoulders – gently, for now.

Deaton takes the scalpel to Tracy's forearm, and Isaac tries not to think about Young Derek.

The knife drags against skin, but it doesn't cut through. Deaton presses down hard enough that his hand quivers with the slightest shake. The friction creates a dull, scraping sound, like nails on a chalkboard. And yet, there's no blood. The application of force doesn't break skin, but it does break the knife.

That shouldn't happen.

Werewolves don't have a thick skin or protective layer. They bleed

and bruise the same as humans. It's their healing that's different. They still hurt, they still experience pain, they still blister and scab. They just don't scar.

Deaton holds the broken scalpel to the light. The blade is severed, clean and precise, snapping under the pressure.

That shouldn't be possible.

Entries of the bestiary flutter in Isaac's mind. The pages blur together, myths and legends morphing in an indiscernible mass. The information is all there, it's on the tip of his tongue, but Isaac can't make sense of it all. He can't untangle the pieces.

Werewolves don't have a thick skin or protective layer, but Isaac knows he read about a creature that does. He just can't remember which it was.

—

The sun is setting, but it's alone in its progress. Isaac's swirl of research isn't getting any clearer and Deaton's tests aren't providing conclusive results. In fact, the only other source of steady momentum is the unease. It's gradually mounting, growing with each passing second.

So, when Scott's phone sounds with notification and he steps away to check the message, Isaac and Stiles eagerly follow. At this point, they'll take any news they can get.

"What's up?" Stiles asks, rubbing his hands together.

Scott looks up from his phone, "It's my mom. It's about the driver of the prison transport. She's saying he's awake and talking."

Isaac is vaguely aware of the frayed energy stirring behind him, movement coming from Malia and Deaton, but he doesn't pay them any mind. He's giving Scott his full attention. He doesn't want to miss a single detail, doesn't want to miss the most important clue.

"Driver didn't have stroke or heart attack," Scott reads the text. "Says it was more like his body just locked up."

It's not the message that brings the final blow of clarity. It's Stiles.

"Like he was paralyzed." He whispers the words and it all becomes so

obvious. "I think I know what she is."

Isaac is right there with him. The bestiary entry draws into sharp focus, memories flash in his mind. This isn't new. They've seen this before.

"Do you care to enlighten the rest of us? Because this doesn't look too good," Deaton says. He's still standing over Tracy, but she's been flipped onto her stomach, sweater pulled up to reveal the line of her spine.

As they approach, Isaac realizes her spine's not as straight as it seemed. Movement is pulsing under her skin. Her vertebrae dance, squirming and sliding, almost as unnatural as the silver of her lips.

And then, her back splits open.

There's no warning, there's just a clean rip down the middle and a burst of black liquid from within. It sprays out, hitting Deaton and Scott, causing an immediate recoil. Isaac doesn't move. He stays perfectly still, almost like he's fallen victim already. He just stares at the bare bones of Tracy's spine, still slithering inside.

The tail comes next. Just like the burst of blood, it flies out unexpectedly. It hits Stiles first, sending him to the ground. Then, it wraps around the other side of the table to take out Deaton and Malia.

Tracy jumps up with a newfound power coursing in her body. Isaac stumbles back, tries to force himself into action, but there's nothing he can do. He's trapped by the mountain ash and too delayed to really fight back.

It's inescapable when Tracy lands a harsh scratch down and across Isaac's neck. The impact sends him twisting on his feet, balance spinning out from under him. He drops face first to the floor. He turns his head to the side, but that's all he can do to ease his fall.

And, seconds later, Scott joins him. He falls on his back, claw marks gashed into his cheek. His body presses close to Isaac, left ankle actually crossed over Isaac's, but there's nothing to be done about it because neither of them can move.

"It wasn't a werewolf!" Stiles pants, half-shouting.

Characterized by claws that secrete a venom which paralyzes their victims for hours.

“Kanima.”

Tracy breaks through the mountain ash and runs out of the clinic.

—

Isaac keeps telling himself it's fine. He's experienced this before, back when Jackson was wreaking havoc on Beacon Hills. He got through it then, and he'll get through it now.

“Hey, Deaton, how the hell did she get through the mountain ash?” Stiles calls, a little urgent and a lot frustrated.

Stiles' voice comes from Isaac's right, but he can't see him. Isaac can't see Deaton either. Or the entrance to the clinic. Or, really, anything beyond Scott and the back wall and Malia.

There's a unique vulnerability in lying with his back exposed, eyesight limited to the space in front of him, unable to move in any way. But Isaac is *fine*.

“I don't know,” Deaton answers. “It's a barrier no supernatural creature should be able to cross.”

“Scott did it,” Stiles argues. He's looking for logic. When everything goes haywire, Stiles looks for an explanation. He looks for a reason. He looks for *why*.

“Once,” Scott says, “but it almost killed me.”

Isaac is close enough that he can almost feel Scott's breath against his jaw, can almost feel the vibration of his voice.

“We should've killed her,” Malia grits out.

“Meanwhile, she's probably on her way to killing someone else,” Stiles rambles. He's unfiltered always, but it's worse in crisis. Isaac knows that.

Knowing doesn't stop the rush of fear.

Derek doesn't know they found Tracy. He doesn't know what she is. Isaac left him in the dark on purpose, and, now, he has no way of warning him.

Isaac has to clear his throat. Grains of sand are settling in his windpipe, and he doesn't have a choice. It's a compulsion, an

automatic movement, a reflex. It's not a loud sound, but it's not lost on Scott. Not this close.

"Listen, everyone, we need to concentrate," Deaton says. "Scott, Isaac, and Malia, you three will probably be able to move long before Stiles and I can, but you need to focus."

"Focus on what?" Malia asks, propped up against a shelf and angry still.

"Healing," Scott says, looking up at her.

"That's right," Deaton says.

Malia is panting, volume and distress rising, "I don't know how to tell my body to heal!"

"Malia, calm down, it's okay!" Stiles says. Isaac wonders which way Stiles is looking, wonders if he can see the panic in Malia's eyes, wonders if that matters when her voice sounds so distraught as it is.

"I can't calm down, I can't move!" Malia practically growls. Her anxiety is almost as contagious as Stiles'.

"It won't last long, we're going to be okay," Scott's words come as a response to Malia, but he's looking at Isaac. His expression is open, easy in his reassurance despite the splatter of black blood on his face and the paralytic toxin in his veins.

Isaac stares back at Scott. He keeps telling himself he's fine, but he's not. He's not fine. He's struggling. And maybe he's better at hiding it than Malia, but he can't hide from Scott. Not when he's this close and this perceptive, not when he's been watching Isaac all day.

"Doc, how do we focus?" Scott keeps talking, this time to Deaton, but he doesn't look away from Isaac.

Isaac tries to ground himself in the rich brown of his eyes. He can't feel Scott against him anymore. He can't feel their arms pressed together or ankles overlapped, but he can feel Scott's eyes. He can feel the weight of their attentive gaze, and he tries to let it anchor him.

"Think of a body part," Deaton answers. "Your hands, your feet, even just the tips of your fingers. Imagine them moving. See it in your mind, and your body will follow."

Isaac tries to do as Deaton says. He starts with his left hand, tries to imagine his fingers moving, tries to imagine them pushing back against Scott's. He tries not to think about anything else. He tries not to think about Derek or sand or the freezer. He tries not to let his mind stray from his fingers and Scott's eyes.

He tries to stay anchored and calm. He tries to stop from clearing his throat and swallowing. He tries.

"Keep your eyes open, Iz." It's barely a whisper, just a ghost of breath on his chin and the thinnest hint of sound.

Instinctively, Isaac's eyes flutter open. He doesn't remember closing them, but he hadn't meant to. He doesn't trust himself with the darkness. He doesn't trust the places his mind will run to.

Scott meets Isaac with a twitch of his lips and a mouth of, "*Good.*"

Isaac focuses less on his imagination – it's difficult to envision anything with open eyes – and more on the present moment. Isaac trusts the warmth beside him, trusts the steady presence, trusts the even heart. Isaac trusts Scott.

—

"Okay," Stiles pants. "I'm pretty sure I just felt my right leg move." He grunts, "Yeah. Definitely felt it. Like a twinge, spasm, something."

"I'm gonna have to disagree, and I think I hold an informed opinion," Deaton says.

Isaac ignores them. He doesn't know how long it's been since Tracy fled the animal clinic, it could've been minutes, though it feels like hours. Regardless, Isaac has found some source of calm in the puffs of air against his cheek and the tracing of blood patterns on Scott's face. Isaac's not letting go of that. He's staying as firmly rooted as he can.

Except, as he traces the left side of Scott's uneven jaw, he sees a flicker of movement in his peripheral vision. Survival instincts kick in and his calm comes undone. His eyes dart to follow the movement. It's just Malia. Her fingers are twitching.

Isaac feels it when Scott's eyes leave his body, and he hears it when Scott says, "Malia."

She smiles, a little exhilarated, "I don't think she cut me that deep."

“Keep going,” Deaton says. “Keep moving.”

Malia groans. And slowly, so slowly, Isaac watches her hand flip over. She presses her palm into the floor, using the leverage to push her body into stiff, half-aborted movements. She grunts, jaw clenched tight and sweat shining on her skin, but she doesn't stop. Her foot jerks. And then, she gets her knees pulled up to her chest.

Sounding almost pained, Malia reaches up to grab the top of the shelf behind her. She continues pushing against it until, suddenly, her whole body jolts forward. She stumbles, nearly crashing to the ground again, but catches herself on the metal table at the room's center instead.

“Malia?” Stiles calls, cottoning on to the development. “Malia, wait for us!”

“There's no time,” Malia bites, still caught between the shelf and the table, between upright and collapsed.

“Look, she's not a werewolf,” Stiles reminds her.

“But she has a scent,” Malia argues, determined. “I can find her.”

“Malia,” Scott interrupts. His voice is serious and strong, “Save her.”

Malia is at the edge of Isaac's field of vision. He can see her eyes draw to Scott, he can see them narrow as her expression twists in irritation.

Then, she presses herself forward and disappears out of sight.

The last thing Isaac sees is anger. It terrifies him.

Isaac remembers every time Malia suggested killing Tracy. He doesn't know whether she was genuine, doesn't know whether she would go through with it, but he knows he's powerless to stop her.

Tracy is a stranger. She's a kanima. She's a threat.

But Isaac feels only pity when he thinks of her. He remembers his own dad's death, remembers wrongful accusations, remembers the chaos that followed. They don't know if Tracy is innocent, they don't know her story, they don't know anything.

Isaac can do nothing to help her, and it's terrifying.

It's also Isaac's tipping point.

Trapped, stuck, powerless. It all becomes too much. The last drop of fear knocks the scale out of balance, sending Isaac toppling out of control.

It starts with labored breathing and frantic eyes. Then, it spirals into the compulsive coughing, and that's when Isaac knows he's lost.

"Jesus, Isaac, what are you choking on? Air?"

Stiles' voice doesn't even reach Isaac. It passes right over him, forgotten in the slew of panic. Isaac is *gone*. His mind is somewhere else entirely. A freezer full of sand, chains made of wolfsbane, sand turning to mountain ash.

Isaac can't stop coughing. It's violent and there might be blood on his chin, but it could also just be spit. Isaac can't wipe it away, so it just runs down his neck as sand runs down his throat. It's in his lungs, his stomach, his nose. Everything is so dry, and Isaac can't breathe.

Isaac is coughing so much and so constantly that barely any oxygen is getting through. His vision is going blurred, and that's just what Isaac needs – darkness. To add to the illusion, to the impossibly real fantasy of all his fears rolled into one.

Isaac's chest constricts and he heaves and he can't. He can't. He can't. He wants to claw and scratch and–

Fingers press against the back of Isaac's hand. *Scott's* fingers are touching his and he can *feel* it and–

"*Isaac.*"

He breathes and breathes and breathes and–

Scott's fingers lace with Isaac's. He stops coughing. Brown eyes meet blue and everything goes quiet.

"Are we okay over there? Are you done dying?"

Stiles' voice breaks the quiet, but it reaches Isaac and Scott's hand is squeezing, and–

The scale tips back into balance.

—

Scott doesn't break Isaac's gaze or drop his hand until both of them

can move. Isaac's pretty sure Scott could've gotten up a full five minutes before Isaac, but he doesn't. He waits until Isaac's leg starts to spasm under Scott's, then they get up together.

Scott pushes onto his side, moving into a seated position. He steadies Isaac as he rolls off of his stomach and onto his back, hand straying for a moment, just long enough to wipe some of the moisture from Isaac's chin. Then, he helps pull Isaac up to sit beside him.

It's then that Isaac catches sight of Theo. He's helping Deaton up to his feet. Stiles is glaring at him, something way too nasty and menacing for someone awkwardly propped up on hands and knees.

Prideful, Stiles swats Theo away when he tries to help him up. It makes Isaac crack a small smile, but, mostly, he's just switching his attention between Scott and Stiles. He's trying to assess the splinter of damage between the pair, trying to see if the tension is still there.

"How did you find us?" Scott asks, finally getting to his feet with Theo's hand on his bicep, stabilizing in a way Isaac knows is likely unnecessary.

"Cause you work here," Theo says. "I heard about Tracy. I've been looking for you."

Theo turns, holding a hand out to Isaac. He hesitates for a moment too long. It's just an offer to help, but whether or not Isaac accepts seems weighted, important.

In the end, Isaac goes for something ambiguous. He pushes up from the ground with one hand, grasping Theo's forearm with the other. He can't escape the second helping hand, wrapping around his middle and hoisting him to his feet, but he needs the support, so he doesn't complain.

Still a little wobbly, Isaac leans against the metal table. He's breathless and certain he looks a mess. It's all vaguely embarrassing, but Isaac tells himself it's fine.

"We lost her," Scott says. Meaning: Tracy.

"And Malia," Stiles adds.

They're all tired and miserable, but there's still lives left to save. They're exhausted and depleted, but they're not done yet.

“I can help,” Theo offers.

Isaac stands between Scott and Stiles, in the middle of two opposing forces. Scott, facing Theo dead on, posture open to him. And Stiles, back turned away, closed off to Theo’s propositions.

And yet, at the same time, Scott and Stiles turn to look in the middle. They turn to look at Isaac, and then passed him to each other.

“Let me help,” Theo persists. “It doesn’t have to mean I’m part of the pack, like you’ve accepted me or anything like that. It just means I can help catch this girl.”

A decision lays heavy in the air. Weighted. Important.

Condition Terminal

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 4

Word count: 10,124

They let Theo help.

The kanima venom has fully purged from their systems, but they're tired and miserable. They need him.

They let Theo help, and, together, they track Tracy and Malia's scents to the sheriff's station.

A smear of scarlet blood paints the vinyl floor, dragged and spread like a body crawled or pulled away. The panic in Isaac's throat intensifies. His mouth feels gritty and dry.

Behind a desk, Isaac sees Sheriff Stilinski being helped to his feet by a deputy. There's a momentary flush of relief, but it doesn't last. He's not who Isaac is searching for.

Derek was here. He was here helping Stilinski with Donovan. He was here and Isaac willingly kept him in the dark. Isaac chose not to give him any forewarning, and then that choice was taken from him. Then, Isaac was paralyzed and powerless. He had time, but he wasted it.

Isaac sees Derek.

He's between a pair of desks, unsteadily propped up on one elbow. His shirt is torn open in claw marks that send Isaac's mind reeling back to Mexico, but the skin beneath is clean. It's stained with red, but it's closed and unharmed.

He's okay, but, still, Isaac rushes forward. He falls to his knees at Derek's side, reaching out to stabilize and secure him.

"Tracy was here, she's not a wer—"

"We know," Isaac says. His voice comes out scratchy and strained.

It's not lost on Derek. Worry flashes in his eyes, but he doesn't put voice to it. Instead, he says, "I'm okay, the venom's wearing off, but—"

Derek is breathless with it, “Lydia’s hurt.”

Isaac’s grip on Derek falters. He loses strength in his hands and fingers as his sandy cells separate and break apart and disconnect. He crumbles and Derek drops an inch. He doesn’t flinch or react, only tenses the muscles in his right arm, only takes on more of his own weight.

Isaac forcibly peels his eyes away from Derek and lets them trail across the station.

Isaac sees Stiles first. He’s standing in the doorway and he’s completely still. He’s turned to stone. He’s frozen in place. He’s paralyzed, not by venom, but by fear. Isaac’s fingers twitch on Derek’s arm and his body hitches forward – a reflex not fully formed, instincts caught between Derek and Stiles.

Isaac sees Lydia second. She’s draped across the floor, almost graceful, if not for the gash along her stomach and the sweat along her skin. She’s still too, but, unlike Stiles, she *is* paralyzed by venom. Her only movement comes from labored breaths and quiet pants and the spread of blood from her abdomen. She’s bleeding profusely, coating Kira’s hands as she rests at Lydia’s side, frantic and unable to help.

Isaac sees Theo third. He’s a flurry of movement, awake and cognizant and active. He pushes past the frozen form of Stiles, fingers deftly removing his belt as he goes. He kneels at Lydia’s side, but, unlike Kira, he’s calm and resourceful. He takes his belt and wraps it around Lydia’s center, circling her sternum, just above the laceration in her side. He’s creating a tourniquet, he’s stopping the blood flow.

“Isaac,” Derek’s voice calls.

Once again, Isaac has to force himself to turn his gaze. He holds Derek a little firmer, meeting his green eyes with what he hopes is apology.

“She’s still here,” Derek grunts, struggling to push himself up a little further. “Malia followed her into the basement. You need to go.”

Isaac doesn’t want to leave Derek’s side.

“Go,” Derek says again. He’s not stern or harsh. He’s gentle and quiet. “The venom’s wearing off, I’m fine, just – save her.”

Isaac can feel the ever-moving ripple of sand under his knees, can feel his weight shifting by a fraction with every breath and quiver. He can

feel blood on his hands and the soft wind. He can feel dry warmth and the glow of the moon on his back.

“Stiles, Isaac!” Scott’s voice calls.

Isaac’s eyes flick in the direction of the sound. Scott has followed the trail of blood to the basement door, but he’s not moving. He’s standing in limbo, waiting for backup.

Isaac squeezes Derek’s arm, and then he lets go. Derek’s body doesn’t fall or collapse. He stays halfway up, and Isaac leaves him between supine and standing. Isaac moves past the sand beneath his feet. He moves past the blood on the vinyl floor. He moves towards Scott.

Stiles doesn’t move. Like Isaac, he doesn’t want to abandon the bedside of the wounded. He doesn’t want to leave Lydia.

“Stiles,” Isaac says. He keeps his voice as calm as he can manage, urgent but not impatient.

Stiles moves, but only to turn his head. He looks back and forth between Isaac and Lydia, then Scott and Lydia, then Isaac again. He’s blazing with anxiety, eyes so stark in their fear that Isaac can hardly bear to meet them.

“It’s okay. She’s all right,” Theo says.

The sound of his voice pulls Isaac’s attention deeper, past Stiles and into the other room. Lydia’s surrounded by help – Kira, Theo, her mom – but she’s looking at Stiles. She’s a little desperate, eyes as wet as her skin.

“Stiles, I’m fine,” she says. “Help Tracy.”

Stiles doesn’t move until his dad is at his side, until there’s an ushering hand on his side, until Lydia’s voice turns firm with, “Go.”

Stiles lets himself get swept by his dad’s arm, lets himself support his staggered weight, lets himself leave.

And, together, they journey to the basement.

—

Scott and Isaac get there first. They find Malia standing over a body.

It’s Tracy. There’s no heartbeat. She’s gone.

Isaac looks at Malia, surprised to find a growl building in his chest. He's met with Scott's hand on his wrist and Malia's frenzied, "It wasn't me."

Isaac remembers Malia's anger, remembers her suggestions to kill, remembers her already blue eyes. And Isaac knows that's not fair. He knows he can't pick and choose. He knows he trusts Derek's blue eyes, and he knows that means he can't spite Malia for hers but...

Tracy is dead. There are no witnesses. There's just Malia standing over a body.

And the last thing Isaac saw from her was anger.

"What the hell happened to her?" Stilinski asks as they circle Tracy.

"There were these people," Malia says. Her heart rate and chemosignals are a mess of emotions. They can't discern the truth in her statement, not yet, at least. "They wore masks—"

I couldn't see their faces. They were covered.

"—Um, there were... there were three of them. I... think there were three."

There's no anger in Malia now. She's wrought with desperation, cheeks and voice wet with her tears and a *need* to be believed. To be *trusted*.

Isaac's not sure he can, but he thinks he has to. He has to try. Because how is this any different? All the evidence is stacked against Malia, but it was all stacked against Isaac and Tracy too. How can Isaac give Tracy the benefit of the doubt, how can he want for her to be innocent, but not want the same from Malia?

"Wh-What are you talking about?" Stiles stammers, taking a step closer to Malia.

Isaac can see Sheriff Stilinski's expression. Isaac can see the conflict within him. He can see the two raging forces: the father and the sheriff.

"They were... They were strong, Stiles." Malia is pleading now. "They had a weapon – Stiles, I didn't do this."

Isaac swallows against his discomfort.

He sinks to his knees. He crouches next to Tracy's body. Scott is at his side, but Isaac doesn't look at him. It's not purposeful, he's just distracted. Isaac reaches out, slow and cautious. He takes Tracy's hand in his. Her skin is still a little warm and Isaac almost gags at the realization, but he swallows again. He holds his blink a little longer than normal. He breathes.

Then, he opens his eyes, and stares down at the clawed hand.

"She's not changing back," Deaton says. "We're going to need to get her out of here."

"What? Hey! Absolutely not," Stilinski barks, moving in with a hand splayed out. The sheriff inside takes over. "This is a *crime* scene. We call the coroner."

Isaac drops Tracy's hand.

"I think the coroner might be very confused by this girl's severed reptilian tail," Deaton says. He stays calm, but Stilinski doesn't.

"I don't care!" he yells, face twisted in anger and tinting red.

"You should," Deaton doesn't raise his voice. He's level and logical, maybe a *touch* condescending. "Unless you're prepared to hold a press conference announcing the presence of supernatural creatures in Beacon Hills."

Stilinski looks away. Isaac can see the war surging inside. He squeezes his eyes tight shut, struggling against the desire to do what is *right* and what is *necessary*.

"Dad, he's right," Stiles says. For the first time, Isaac notices the split in his shirt, the blood still lingering on the surface of skin. He frowns and stands, edging a little closer to Stiles – a fully formed reflex.

Stilinski's eyes open, but he rocks back, like he's offended by the words from his son.

"Maybe at the clinic, we can figure out how to change her back, then call the coroner?" Scott suggests, always the beacon of peace.

"There – There is a *line*," Stilinski paces, emotions unearthed and frazzled. "There is a line that we have to draw."

"Dad, you've already crossed it. More than once," Stiles says.

Stilinski stops moving. He looks over his shoulder. He's looking at Stiles, and Isaac knows what he's thinking. He can practically hear, *that's different*. Isaac wonders whether Stilinski knows how biased he can be. He wonders if Stilinski knows that, if he doesn't reconcile the sheriff and the father, he's going to be forced to choose between them instead.

"Sheriff, please, let me help," Deaton says. He waits until Stilinski meets his eye to add, "I've dealt with things like this before."

Stilinski shakes his head, and Isaac sees the moment he gives up. For now, the fight inside releases. For now, Stilinski bends. For now, he says, "Just do it fast."

Scott and Isaac burst through the hospital doors. Scott's shirt is still stained with black blood and Isaac's pretty sure he still looks half dead from his previous panic, but the hospital isn't the worst place to look a mess. They don't draw any unwanted attention, but they do pull in Liam. He rushes over, matching their quick pace.

"Do you remember the hole I fell in?" he asks.

Isaac spares a quick glance towards Scott, both displaying obvious confusion.

"Is this important, Liam? Lydia is really—"

"There was a necklace in the hole, and then I saw Tracy's yearbook picture and she was wearing the same one," Liam says, still practically running alongside them. "So, we went out to try to find the hole, but found a new one instead."

Isaac stops in his tracks. He thinks back to the hole Liam fell in, and then, back even further, to months of operating the excavator. He remembers fresh dirt. He remembers the distinct shape and size and depth. He remembers digging graves.

Scott and Liam carry on a few paces without Isaac, but, as soon as they notice his absence, they stop and turn.

Scott takes a step back towards Isaac, one hand held out at his side, not quite reaching out, but close to it. "What is it?"

Isaac looks between Scott and Liam. Then, "She was buried."

“What?” Scott half whispers.

“The second hole you found, was it the same?” Isaac asks, focused on Liam. “Same shape? Same size?”

“Yeah...” Liam says slowly. He’s starting to catch on, the realization is building.

“It’s not a hole,” Isaac says. “It’s a grave.”

Scott is staring at Isaac with wide eyes and a spark of fear. “Then – Then, Tracy was buried alive.”

Isaac nods.

“And what? She crawled out?” Liam asks, brows furrowed.

Isaac starts walking again, trusting Scott and Liam to follow. And they do. Though, the conversation doesn’t end.

“So, if there’s a second hole, that means someone else was buried,” Liam rambles on. “Right?”

They make it to the elevator. Scott pauses, fingers hovering over the button, but not pressing. He’s looking at Isaac with intent, eyes asking, *this okay?*

Isaac tips his head in a tiny, near nonexistent movement, lips quirking to the side just so. Completely silent, he says, *yes*.

Scott presses the button.

“Right?” Liam repeats, unaware of the muted conversation happening around him.

“Yeah, probably,” Isaac says. He’s blunt, but only because his mind is racing and the surprises keep coming.

“But, who was it?” Scott asks. He’s turned to Liam, “Do you have any idea?”

Liam shakes his head, “No, but I have a feeling we’re going to want to find out.”

As the elevator dings and the door slides open, Isaac can’t help but think: *which is more important? The who or the why?*

Isaac, Scott, and Liam join the others just as Melissa approaches.

“How bad is it?” Stiles asks. The wound on his chest is still open and red, but he doesn’t seem to care. He’s got tunnel vision now, tuned into Lydia and her safety and nothing else.

“Could have been worse,” Melissa says, but doesn’t give much else. She continues right along, “Theo, nice going on that tourniquet. You probably saved her life.”

On Isaac’s right, Stiles’ anxiety is potent and heavy. It fills the air and Isaac’s lungs, shared between them like a collective burden. And Isaac doesn’t miss his glance towards Theo either. He joins in that too, observing the openness in Theo’s eyes, the red rimmed concern.

Melissa turns in the center of their little circle, facing Scott. “She’s about to go into surgery, so it’s going to be a while.”

Stiles is still looking at Theo, expression obvious in its contemplation, but any feelings he has are concealed in the strength of his worry. Isaac moves a little closer to Stiles, letting their arms graze. Stiles presses back and they tether together, anchored in the subtle contact.

“Any other supernatural details that I need to know about, or do we just stitch her up and hope for the best?” Melissa asks.

Isaac’s mind feels torn in ten different directions. He can barely comprehend the question. His energy has decayed down to barely a flicker and he doesn’t know where to focus it. Lydia, Tracy, Stiles, Theo. Kanima, graves, mercury, claws.

“It was the tail,” Kira says.

“Yeah, Tracy cut her with the tail,” Derek confirms, “if that makes a difference.”

Isaac looks across the circle at Derek. Briefly, their eyes meet. There’s nothing profound about it, it’s just a brush of connection.

“Okay,” Melissa nods, a little bewildered, but accepting nonetheless. Then, she exits the circle, returning to her work.

“But it wasn’t just Tracy,” Malia says. She speaks with clarity, less emotional than before, but still firmly rooted in her story. “There –

There were the others,” her voice tilts up and she turns on Stiles, “the guys in the masks.”

No one says anything. Isaac’s not sure if the silence is spurred by disbelief or by disinterest. Or, well, maybe it’s not exactly disinterest. Maybe it’s distraction. Maybe they all have too much weighing on their minds.

Liam is the first to leave, giving a quiet, “My step-dad is waiting for me.”

He gets a quiet smile from Isaac and a pat on the back from Scott.

Next, Derek looks at Isaac. He lifts a brow, and asks, “Ready?”

Isaac nods. He lets his eyes take one more lap around the group. They land on Stiles. And, walking backwards in departure, Isaac points at Stiles’ chest and says, “You could at least put a bandage on that, you know?”

—

Derek is doing it again. Isaac is reading, skimming over page after page, searching for ceremonial burials or silver stained lips. And Derek is watching him.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Reading,” Isaac mumbles, not looking up from the book.

“Isaac,” Derek huffs. There’s exasperation in his tone, but there’s no frustration. It’s fueled by a tired concern. “You’re exhausted. Go to bed.”

“I’m fine,” Isaac counters. He really shouldn’t be putting up a fight. He’s pretty sure he hasn’t taken in a single word since he sat down, but he has to keep looking.

“Isaac,” Derek repeats.

He looks up from the page. “What?”

Derek ignores him. He walks over, taking a seat on the couch next to Isaac. Slowly, he maneuvers the book from his hold. He closes it.

“Well now I’ve lost my place,” Isaac whispers, more whine than anger.

Derek exhales a laugh. Then, “What’s going on inside your head right now?”

Isaac goes quiet. He’s not resisting, he’s just thinking. He doesn’t know where to begin, he doesn’t know which issue is the most pressing. And so, it all comes out at once. It’s not a fast ramble, not like Stiles, it’s slow and clumsy, like, “Something weird is happening, Derek. I – I saw Tracy’s claws back at the station, and they... they were like ours. They were the claws of a werewolf. But... it’s not just that. She was buried alive and there was something like mercury coming out of her and – and she could get past the mountain ash. It wasn’t even hard, she just. She ran right through it.”

Derek’s expression is contorted in confusion – understandably so. Isaac can’t make sense of it all. He scrubs his hand through his hair, tugging a little, like he’s trying to force his brain awake. If he could just think clearly...

“If she got through the mountain ash, then she’s not supernatural,” Derek says. “Not really.”

Neither one really knows what that means.

Derek clears his throat. “We’re not going to be able to figure it all out tonight. It’ll make more sense after a good night’s sleep. Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Isaac says. Though, honestly, he wouldn’t count on it.

—

Isaac is just on the verge of sleep when his phone rings. He’s pulled out of fuzzy softness and forced into harsh consciousness. He could ignore the call, but he wasn’t actually asleep yet and he still has some awareness, enough to be worried, at least. So, he rolls over and grabs his phone. The screen is lit with Scott’s name and the goofy contact photo he added over the summer. It brings a small smile to Isaac’s features, one that can be heard in his answering, “This better be important.”

“Shit, did I wake you? I’m s—”

“Scott, it’s fine. I wasn’t asleep yet,” Isaac says, cutting off the unnecessary apologies. His brain’s still a little wobbly, but he’s curious now. He wasn’t expecting a call from Scott, not when they saw each other less than an hour ago. So, “What’s up?”

"I just spoke to Deaton about Tracy," Scott says. "About how she could cross the mountain ash."

Isaac hums. "Me and Derek were just talking about that, but we didn't get very far. What did Deaton say?"

"He thinks Tracy was made. Like, she isn't really supernatural. She wasn't bitten or born, she..." Scott trails off, like he's mulling over the words. *"He thinks someone is trying to make supernatural creatures with non-supernatural means."*

Isaac might have had some of the pieces, but he never would have come to such a conclusion. It's so bizarre, so unthinkable, so *perfect* for Beacon Hills. "Oh. Well. That's—"

"Terrifying, I know," Scott finishes his sentence. *"Deaton's leaving for a few days to try to find out more, but I've – I don't think I've ever seen him this freaked out. We need to be careful and we need to look out for each other."*

Isaac nods, and, "We always do."

"Speaking of," Scott says, not as slick as he thinks he is, *"how are you doing?"*

Isaac considers stretching the truth, but he doesn't. There's no reason to. Not with Scott. "Heh, I – I've been better, but you already knew that."

"Maybe," Scott says, faking coy.

It pulls a laugh from Isaac, lightening the mood enough for him to say, "It was Tracy's dad that set me off, but you probably already knew that too. I just – I don't know. It got to me. I wanted her to be innocent, but I guess she wasn't."

"Well, actually, about that," Scott says and Isaac flickers with anticipation, *"Kira told me something back at the hospital. She said Tracy was still asleep. She was stuck in a night terror the whole time."*

Isaac doesn't know what to say to that. He thinks of the persistent feeling of sand in his throat. He thinks maybe he and Tracy were more alike than he could have realized, and more than she would ever know.

"Oh," is all Isaac can muster.

It's quiet for a moment. Then, *"Do you want me to stay on the line?"*

"Um," Isaac says. "I – okay."

"Okay," Scott echoes. *"Sleep well, Isaac."*

There are no nightmares. Isaac dreams, but it's blurry and distant. All he really remembers are bright paints, the presence of mjolnir, and Scott's sunny smile.

Isaac's phone isn't on his chest anymore. He rolled over in the night, leaving it tucked up under him, digging into his collarbone. Isaac squirms to retrieve it and, predictably, the line is dead. Isaac doesn't know how Scott does it. Every time they fall asleep like this, Isaac wakes up alone, phone silent and disconnected.

Curious, he checks the call duration. **06:16:46.**

With some quick mental math, Isaac comes to the conclusion that Scott must have ended the call less than ten minutes ago.

Maybe that's what woke Isaac up. Because his alarm hasn't gone off yet.

Isaac is on his way to Mr. Yukimura's class when he's joined by an unexpected guest. Theo sidesteps in front of him, blocking his path and forcing him to stop. Isaac responds by crossing his arms, but, instead of solidifying his annoyance, the movement evokes a memory.

Lydia's body on the floor. Blood on her stomach. Theo's belt wound around her chest. Melissa's voice saying, "Nice going on that tourniquet. You probably saved her life."

Isaac drops his arms to his sides, shoving his hands into his pockets right alongside his distrust. He doesn't say anything, but he does open his posture and raise his brows. It's an invitation, welcoming Theo as an unexpected, but not unwanted guest.

"Hey, Isaac, sorry, I know you've got to get to class, but—" Theo inhales. "Any updates on Lydia?"

Isaac shakes his head. "No. She's... She's still in the ICU."

“Oh,” Theo says.

Isaac’s eyes narrow. He draws a hand from his pocket and half his suspicions come with it. Theo might have saved Lydia’s life – something Isaac will be forever grateful for – but there’s still something not right. His reaction is stiff, like maybe he already knew about Lydia’s status.

“Yeah, you know, I’m probably not the best person to go to for updates,” Isaac says.

Theo’s brows draw together, “Why’s that?”

“I’m not usually the first one to know these things,” Isaac shrugs. He’s not sure if it’s the truth, or if it’s a lie to keep Theo at bay.

“Huh,” Theo says. Isaac’s face twists in confusion and mild irritation. Theo must notice because he continues with, “No, sorry, it’s just. I figured: Scott is super overwhelmed being the alpha and Stiles is super freaked out about Lydia... So, I don’t want to bother them, but – I don’t know. I guess I thought you were close enough to the inner circle to know things, but not too close that you’d be too busy helping.”

Isaac’s bottom lip catches off center between his teeth, pulling to a slow release with lowered brows. His mouth parts open, but he doesn’t try to speak.

“Right,” Theo says. He throws a thumb over his shoulder, falling back a step, “I better get going. The bell’s about to ring.”

Isaac nods.

“See ya,” Theo says.

In hell, Isaac hopes.

—

Isaac goes to class and tries to ignore Theo’s voice in his head. Mr. Yukimura is teaching about frescos and The Sistine Chapel. He’s talking about watercolors on wet plaster, paint that dries fast and perforates the wall, something that wasn’t there before becoming fixed and nearly unchangeable in one single moment. He’s talking about the ceiling telling nine stories from the Book of Genesis, creation and punishment and the savior.

Isaac is trying to listen. He wanted to take notes for Lydia, wanted to be prepared for her return. Instead, he's distracted by her absence.

Facing forward and focusing on the chalkboard, Isaac should be able to ignore the void behind him. He *should*, but he *can't*. He's all too aware of the missing pieces of Lydia, the pieces beyond sight. He's all too aware of her missing perfume, her missing heartbeat, her missing scratch of pencil on paper.

Isaac is too aware of all that is lacking. He's too aware of Lydia and everything he doesn't know.

—

Isaac sits with Scott and Kira in the library. Well, Isaac and Kira are sitting. Scott won't sit down. Instead, he's leaning over Isaac's shoulder, hand pressed on the table and craning his neck to get a good look at the bestiary.

Scott only looks up when Stiles and Malia approach. He calls across the library, not caring about keeping a quiet volume, "Did you get in to see Lydia?"

"No," Stiles says, hands sliding together. "I tried using my free period, but she's still in the ICU and no one outside family is allowed in."

Isaac forces down memories of electrical burns and Derek's angry shouts.

"Well, we've got one thing," Scott says, sliding the bestiary closer to the middle of the table.

"Anything in there about half-werewolves, half-kanimas?" Malia asks.

It seems that everyone has been caught up on Deaton's discovery. Isaac really shouldn't feel bitter about it.

"The chimera," Scott's voice comes just above a whisper, but it pulls them all in nonetheless. Isaac looks up at the still standing Scott. His eyes are trained down, far away like he's lost in thought.

"Ehh, what?" Stiles blurts his quiet confusion.

"Chimera," Scott repeats, and, Isaac has to admit, he's surprised to hear the word coming from Scott. "It's a creature made of incongruous parts."

"It's from Greek mythology," Isaac says. "A hybrid creature – part lion, part goat, part snake."

He tears his eyes away from Scott, looking around at the group. They're all looking at him funny. It's a hybrid expression – part shock, part confusion, part impressed.

"What?" Isaac says, faking nonchalance, "I read."

"Okay, moving past *that* alarming development..." Stiles stretches a pause, "Which part is which? I mean, is it a tiny snake head with goat horns and a lion body because that would be aw–"

"Nevermind that," Scott says, cutting off Stiles' rambles and bringing his ridiculous, wiggling arm gestures to a halt. "Liam said he found two burial sites. That means Tracy's *not* the only one."

The slight humor in the air drifts away, replaced by strain and stress. Kira speaks into it, "Who's the second chimera?"

"Yeah, and why would they bury them?" Stiles asks.

"Deaton thinks it's part of their process," Scott says. Again, none of them really know what that means.

"The people in masks," Malia says. She's looking down, possibly avoiding eye contact on purpose, though it hardly matters. Kira is flipping through the bestiary, Scott and Stiles are exchanging in a pointed look, and Isaac is watching them from the outside.

Until, suddenly, the pair turn their gaze on Isaac. He's startled, even though he knows he shouldn't be. He shouldn't be surprised by the inclusion. He shouldn't be surprised by the look in their eyes, the expression that seems to beg the question, *what do you think?*

Isaac stays blank. He doesn't know what he thinks. He wants to trust Malia, but he doesn't want to believe her. He doesn't want to believe that there are more masked evils.

"What's our next move?" Stiles asks, hands holding the straps of his backpack. His knuckles are almost white with the grip.

"My parents might know something," Kira says with a small shrug. "I don't know if they would tell me if they did, but I could still try."

Scott flashes Kira a look that almost reads as pity.

“Derek has a bunch of books and acquired knowledge,” Isaac says. Then, because it feels important, he tacks on, “And he’ll want to help.”

“Okay, so. Kira, you go home to talk to your parents. Stiles and Malia, you stay here to look through the bestiary and school books. And,” Scott turns to Isaac, “you and I can go to the loft to talk to Derek?”

Isaac nods, and says, “Yeah. Sounds like a plan.”

—

All of Derek’s books are piled on the metal table. There’s at least two dozen and, since Laura’s books haven’t been shipped yet, they already know most of them are useless or outdated. Still, they dive in anyway.

“When Isaac told me about Tracy being part kanima and part werewolf, I... I thought maybe she was stuck. Like, whatever manifested her as a kanima was only halfway resolved or something, but... this?” Derek sighs. “I really don’t know any more than you do, Scott.”

Scott frowns.

“*But* I guess I do have more resources,” Derek says, looking at the pile of books. “I’m not sure how helpful they’ll be. There’s no precedent for this. I mean, you’re either bitten or born. There are no other options.”

“Well, there might be now,” Scott says.

Derek nods. He’s still looking at the books. “Where do we start?”

Fully synchronized, Derek and Scott turn to face Isaac. It’s just as sudden as it was back in the library, and, again, Isaac has to try to hide his surprise. Slowly, he asks, “Um. Why are you looking at me?”

“Because you’re the one who’s hardly put the bestiary down since Lydia gave it to you,” Derek says, unabashed and perceptive as ever.

“Yeah, and you knew about the chimera mythology,” Scott says, like it’s obvious.

Isaac ignores the strange twinge in his chest. He thinks like Stiles. He imagines an evidence board. “Uh. We lay out all the variables. We divide it up. We look at the pieces individually and... and figure out how they go together.”

Scott smiles encouragingly.

“What do we know so far?” Derek asks.

“We know we’re dealing with hybrid creatures. These – These chimeras are being manufactured,” Scott says. “We just don’t know how. Or why.”

“But we know that Tracy was one of them,” Isaac adds. “There’s got to be a reason why she was chosen. Did she... Do you think she volunteered?”

Isaac volunteered. He willingly accepted the bite, but *choosing* to be *experimented on* is something else entirely. It’s a chilling thought.

“I’m not sure that matters now,” Derek says, slightly under his breath.

Isaac fixes him with a glare.

“Don’t look at me like that! I gave you a choice, didn’t I? I – I’m not supporting it, I’m just saying, if we need to prioritize...” Derek trails off. He scrunches his nose in apology.

Isaac huffs. “Well, okay, yeah. For Tracy, it might not matter now, but we *need* to know who the second chimera is. If it’s someone with a choice... then it could be someone...”

Someone like me, Isaac doesn’t say.

“Either way, whether it’s voluntary or not, there’s a reason Tracy was involved,” Scott says. “I think, whatever it is, that has to be important.”

“Well, there you go. Two-to-one. Sorry, Derek, but it’s decided. It matters,” Isaac says, only a little unbearable.

Derek just rolls his eyes. “Okay, okay. What else is there? Other than Tracy and the hybrid creatures?”

“The burials,” Scott says. “We think it’s part of the creation process.”

Derek nods. “Right. Is that it?”

There’s a pause.

“The guys in the masks,” Isaac says because he has to. Because they owe it to Malia to at least add it to the list. “They could be the ones behind all of this.”

“Here’s what I’m thinking,” Derek says. “We put Tracy and the guys in the masks on the back burner. There’s nothing here that’s going to help us learn more about Tracy and we don’t have enough information about the masks to really look. So, we focus on the chimeras and the burials.”

Derek isn’t giving out orders. He’s making a suggestion, and, when he relays it to Isaac and Scott, he’s genuinely asking their opinion. He’s genuinely asking for their approval.

“Okay,” Isaac gives his easily. Derek is right. They need to prioritize. The list is too long. The pieces are too disconnected, too spread out, too all over the place. They don’t have the time or resources to cover every inch of the unknown because, right now, almost everything is unknown.

—

It’s nice, the three of them working together. It’s strange without Stiles there, definitely feels like something’s missing, but the quiet is nice too. It helps them focus and work, though it is a little suffocating.

Isaac clears his throat. It seems to be becoming a new habit of his. He’s certain it’s not a good one.

“All good?” Derek asks without even looking up from his page.

“Yeah,” Isaac says, returning to his.

It’s nice, the three of them working together. So, of course, it doesn’t last.

Scott’s phone buzzes in his bag. It takes him a moment to dig it out. (*It should just be in his pocket like a normal person*, Isaac muses.) But, once his phone is in his hand, Scott seems to droop and tense all at once, shoulders going tight and brief calm disappearing.

“It’s my mom,” he says. “She wants me to come to the hospital. Possible supernatural activity.”

Isaac’s first thought is of Lydia. If something supernatural is happening at the hospital, then Lydia is vulnerable.

“You two go. I’ll stay here and keep looking,” Derek says, unfazed and simple.

Scott looks between Derek and Isaac. "Are you sure?"

"Positive," Derek says. Then, to break the rising tension, "I can handle some books. Whatever's happening at the hospital... you might not be equipped to deal with on your own."

"Are you doubting my abilities?" Scott asks, but his voice is light and easy.

"Literally always," Derek says. "How you've managed to survive this long is a mystery."

"Oh because you have such a good track record with staying alive," Isaac quips. It pulls a shocked laugh from Scott and a quiet, almost proud smile from Derek, like, *that was rude, but I'm glad you can joke about it.*

"Just go," Derek grumbles despite the fondness of his gaze.

Well, it was nice while it lasted.

—

For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, Scott and Isaac step out of the hospital elevator to meet with Melissa.

"This way," she says, ushering them back. She doesn't stop to ensure that they follow, only continues down the hallway, a little breathless. "He came in about forty-five minutes ago. His name's Corey."

Right on cue, a jarring scream reaches Isaac's ears. He turns and shares a startled, worried look with Scott.

"Melissa," Dr. Geyer rushes over.

"Yeah?"

The doctor falls into stride alongside her, saying, "I'm gonna find the anesthesiologist covering acute pain. See what she can do."

"Okay," Melissa breathes.

Then, just as quickly as he came, Dr. Geyer takes off again, though Isaac isn't paying him much attention. He's more focused on the brutal screams echoing through the hall. They come first in short bursts and then sustained, elongated cries. It can only be described as agony.

As they approach the door and the screams get louder, Melissa pauses.

“Mom, what’s happening to him?” Scott asks, finally catching up to and surpassing Melissa. He moves towards the door, concern winning out against any trepidation he feels.

“It’s the pain. Nothing’s working,” Melissa says. “We’ve already pumped him full of morphine. The only option is to put him in a medically-induced coma. It’s how we help burn victims deal with the pain.”

(Don’t think about Peter, don’t think about Peter, don’t think about Peter.)

They’re not just here to check for supernatural activity. They’re here as a last resort. Melissa is good at her job – if there was any other solution, she would have found it. So, they’re here to offer relief, and, with screams like that, there’s nothing Isaac wants to do more.

Scott must feel the same because he takes a final step towards the door. He pushes it open.

The screams grow impossibly louder, but it’s nothing compared to the sight splayed out before them. A teenage boy – surely no older than Liam – is chained to the bed by his wrists and ankles, but it doesn’t stop his writhing. He’s pulling against the restraints, skin and hair drenched with sweat as he screams and screams and screams.

Melissa closes the door behind them just as Corey’s squeezed-shut eyes peel open. There’s a break in the screams, but only so he can beg, “Please, make it *stop*.”

Scott looks at Isaac. His eyes are alive with a flurry of fear and panic.

Corey keeps grunting and squirming in the bed. It’s like he’s trying to crawl out of his body, like if he wasn’t chained down, he’d be scratching at his skin.

Again, he cries, “Please, make it stop.”

And Scott does. He takes Corey’s hand in both of his. Black begins to creep up Scott’s veins, circling his arms and sinking in. The screaming stops, but it offers Isaac no comfort. Almost immediately, Scott begins to protest against the pain. His own eyes squeeze shut and he grits his teeth and he groans.

This is worse.

The black carries up Scott's neck and he tips his head back, but he doesn't let go. He's taking too much. The pain is too strong. Scott sounds like he can barely breathe. Isaac can't watch this.

"Scott," Isaac says.

He gets ignored. Scott's mouth is open wide, strangled sounds releasing from his throat. The room is so thick with the scent of pain that Isaac is nearly choking too. It's salt and sour and sting.

"Let go," Melissa says, but Scott isn't listening.

Isaac isn't going to let Scott do this. He rounds the bed to Scott's side, trying to force Corey's hand from his. Scott doesn't give. He keeps his grip on pale fingers even as his heart rate spikes and splutters, even as his lungs heave.

"*Please*," Isaac begs, tight with emotion. "You're going to do something you'll regret, Scott. Just – We'll take it in turns, okay? You have to – *Scott*. Let me help."

Isaac doesn't know what does it for Scott. Maybe the pain gets to be too much, maybe he hears the promise in Isaac's words, or maybe it's the way his voice breaks. Isaac doesn't know, but Scott releases Corey's hand.

Immediately, his body tips forward. He catches himself on the bed, but Isaac steadies him anyway. He gets two hands on either side of Scott's middle, applying enough pressure to be both securing *and* reassuring.

Scott gasps for breath, chest swelling against the last dwindles of pain. He pants, "I'm okay."

For a moment, everything is still. Corey has gone quiet and calm. Scott's breathing is still a little shallow and he doesn't move to stand yet. He stays hunched over, catching his breath and readjusting to a world without agony. Isaac doesn't let go of him either. He waits, keeps holding him safe and stable.

Isaac doesn't move until Scott does. He waits until Scott presses up from the bed, then he pulls his hands away.

"Let me see it," Scott says, looking between Melissa and the bandage on Corey's left forearm. "Let me see his arm."

Melissa nods. She moves away from her son and up towards the head of the bed. Carefully and gently, she removes the restraint from Corey's wrist. Then, she pulls back the dressing.

Almost his entire forearm is torn open, mottled with different layers of skin and blood and tissue and bone. It looks raw and fresh and painful. It looks black and red and green. It looks like it's been melted.

"What is that?" Scott asks, wincing at the reveal.

"The lab says scorpion venom," Melissa says.

"Scorpion?" Scott repeats, confused and disbelieving. Isaac isn't. He's already remembering. Pages of the bestiary are already coming back to him.

Like the kanima, this shapeshifter produces a venom of its own. Rows of stingers grow and protrude along their limbs and spines. The stingers produce a venom that inflicts searing pain upon its victims.

"I know, but that's not the weirdest part," Melissa says, covering the wound as she talks. "A sting this bad means that he should have been dead ten hours again, and the scorpion that stung him..." she walks around the bed, "would have been ten feet tall."

"Please tell me that doesn't mean there's a giant scorpion running around Beacon Hills," Scott says, like that might be the end of his rope.

"It's called a girtablilu," Isaac says. "It's a Sumerian shapeshifter. With the traits of a scorpion."

Melissa stops at the door. She looks over her shoulder, bringing a small shred of levity to the atmosphere, "When did you get so smart?"

Isaac's pretty sure there's pink dusting across his features, but, if asked, he would blame it on the exertion and warmth of the room.

"Lucas..." Corey's whisper draws their attention and saves Isaac from more embarrassing questions. The boy's eyes are open now and he seems more settled. Looking at Scott, he repeats, "It was Lucas."

—

Isaac holds Corey's hand in his. He draws in pain, but not the way Scott did. He doesn't try to take it all at once. He takes it slow. He

steadily eases the pain out of Corey and into his own body. Black veins stand out in harsh contrast against his pale skin and, even at a slow rate, it hurts. The pain bites and burns and sears through him, but Corey hasn't started screaming again. In fact, his chemosignals are crisp with the fresh scent of relief, like cool morning air.

That makes the pain worth it.

Isaac ignores the stinging in his veins and the weight of Scott's eyes on him. Instead, he says, "Corey?"

"Yeah?" the boy whispers, looking away from their joined hands, awe still in his expression when he meets Isaac's gaze.

"We need to know what happened," Isaac says. He tries to keep his voice gentle, but he doesn't miss the flicker of uncertainty in Corey.

There's a shift, then. An alleviated focus and a dwindling of being noticed and *seen* as, finally, Scott turns his attention to where it should have been the entire time – on Corey.

"What Lucas did to you," Scott says, moving closer to the younger boy, "he's going to do it to someone else, and it's going to be much worse."

Meaning: lethal. Meaning: deadly. Meaning: "We *need* to know what happened."

"I don't really know," Corey says. Then, with great effort and some support from Isaac, he presses up into a seated position. Still, Isaac doesn't stop taking his pain. "He's never been like that before."

"Like what?" Scott asks.

"Aggressive," Corey says, but it's nearly a question. He glances down at his lap, giving a small exhale. "We were taking it slow, but it wasn't me," Corey looks up again, slight smile in place. "*He* was the shy one." His expression drops. "Then, we were hanging out today, and it's like he was a different person."

"Different how?" Scott asks.

Isaac doesn't really participate in the conversation. The flow of pain is sustainable, but it still tingles and smarts. It's a sharp pain. Intense.

"Like, super confident. We were just kissing, and then I felt this sharp

sting on my arm and..." Corey looks down at the bandage on his forearm. "And then I looked up at him and I swear his eyes turned back."

Isaac's grip on Corey's hand falters, letting go for just a second. "You mean totally black?"

For a moment, the question goes unanswered. Corey winces at the sudden and unexpected onslaught of pain. His face scrunches up and his body tips backwards, like he's losing his balance. Isaac reaches out with quick hands, helping him to stay seated. And, when Scott takes over the taking of pain, Isaac lets him.

"Sorry," Isaac says.

Corey shakes his head. Then, "The whole eye turned black."

The girtablilu can be easily identified by their unique eyes. In their shifted form, girtablilu have full black eyes with their sclera, irises, and pupils no longer visible.

"But it was only for a second," Corey rambles on. "He said sorry, that he'll see me at the club tonight, and then he just left." He shrugs. "And, a few minutes later, I'm in the worst pain of my life."

"Hold on," Scott says. "You said 'club.' What club?"

"Every Friday night," Corey's eyes flit between them, "Sinema."

—

"Okay, I've texted Kira to meet us there, but we need to hurry," Scott says, pocketing his phone in the hospital parking lot.

With his hands now free, Isaac tosses Scott his helmet. Scott catches it with ease, but he doesn't put it on yet. He stands on the opposite side of the motorcycle, watching Isaac.

"Didn't you just say we needed to hurry?" Isaac asks, voice light and a little teasing despite the urgency coursing through him.

Scott nods, but still doesn't put the helmet on. He's playing with it, passing it back and forth in his hands. Then, "Is there anything else you know about this g-girt-gir-g—"

"Girtablilu," Isaac offers.

“Girtablilu,” Scott repeats. “Is there anything else you know about it? Anything that could help us stop Lucas?”

“Um,” Isaac thinks, trying to recall the full extent of the bestiary page. He had only read it once, maybe twice because of the mention of the kanima. “The – The stingers aren’t very long. The more distance we can maintain the better.”

“Which is why you asked me to text Kira,” Scott says, nodding and catching on. Like he’s thinking, he adds, “Right. Okay. Well.”

“Yeah, there’s not much distance in claws and fangs, but we’ll be fine. Just be mindful. Aim for the torso.”

“Got it,” Scott says.

Isaac wishes he had brought his ring daggers. They don’t offer the same distance that a sword would, but they would provide a barrier between. The daggers are impersonal, less risk of snagging on a stinger that way.

Unfortunately, there’s no time to retrieve them. There’s no time to prepare. They need to get to Sinema.

—

The bass booming music of Sinema echoes through the surrounding streets, vibrating in their bones as they rush towards the back of the building. There, Kira is waiting for them.

“Half-werewolf, half-scorpion?” she asks, incredulous. “Really?”

“Really,” Scott says.

Then, he moves past Kira, breaking the lock of the back door. The three of them hurry in, and, immediately, an alarm starts blaring. It flashes red light and rings loud, heard plain and easy over the noise of the club.

The three stop in their tracks. Isaac and Scott freeze, turning wide eyed and shocked and completely unprepared.

Kira, on the other hand, springs into action. She breaks off the middle section of her sword-belt. She spins to find the source of the alarm, and then, she takes aim. She flings the metal disc through the air. The piece hits the alarm with precision and *shatters* it. The ringing goes

quiet and the flashing fades to nothing. The only sound is the raging party and the only lights are the strobes within.

“God, you’re so cool,” Scott says, grinning.

Isaac nods, “Yeah. I second that.”

Kira laughs, but it’s overshadowed by a resounding growl from within the club. The three share a frantic look, and then they follow the noise.

Inside, the club is lit only with neon lights. It’s full of sound: music pumping, people chatting, supernaturals snarling. Isaac, Scott, and Kira push through a curtain of silver beads, and, on the other side, they find Lucas pinning Liam to the ground.

“You’re a little late!” he shouts, thick with anger as he struggles against Lucas, only narrowly avoiding the slice of stingers.

Scott runs, swinging around the metal support beam. He uses his momentum to slam both feet into Lucas’ side, breaking his hold on Liam. Scott has Lucas’ attention now, and the girtablilu easily blocks his next attack. Lucas uses both arms to get a grip on Scott, then flips him over, through the air and down onto his back.

It leaves Scott vulnerable, and Isaac quickly joins the effort. His eyes glow and his claws and fangs come out, but it’s not a full shift. It’s an efficient half transformation, enough to get him into the fight without being completely defenseless.

Isaac takes his own advice and tries to maintain a good distance. He starts with a strong kick to Lucas’ chest. It pushes him back a few paces, but Lucas isn’t deterred. He steadies his weight and swings his stinger-lined arms Isaac’s way.

Isaac dodges. With each failed swipe, Isaac tries to land one of his own. While ducking under Lucas’ dangerous arms, Isaac sweeps his claws across his middle, slicing his shirt and drawing blood. It does some damage, but, worse than that, it makes Lucas angry. His next swipe comes faster and stronger. Isaac manages to escape the blow of the stingers, but he gets knocked off balance.

Lucas gives up on the swings and takes a page out of Isaac’s book, driving a foot into his sternum. Fierce impact sends Isaac stumbling backwards, crashing into Liam, who was about to jump in. The collision exacerbates the effect of the kick, sending Isaac *and* Liam to

the ground in a tangle of limbs.

Fortunately, Kira is there to steal Lucas' focus. She whips her sword through the air in impressive spirals. Then, she directs the blade to the line of stingers down Lucas' arm, meeting with a harsh metal clang.

With Lucas distracted, Isaac focuses on freeing himself from Liam. He tries to wriggle out from under the weight of Liam's legs. He doesn't even understand how Liam ended up half on top of him – *Isaac* was the one who fell backwards into him.

Through a thick lisp and sharp fangs, Liam grumbles, "Nice going, tweedle-loser."

Guess those nicknames are sticking.

Isaac scoffs, but ignores the retort. He pushes the weight of Liam's leg off of his. Liam shoves back, rolling Isaac to the side enough to release the arm that he landed on.

"You're fucking heavy," Liam hisses.

"I'm 6'2". What do you expect?" Isaac bites.

Liam doesn't respond. He gets to his feet before Isaac does, but he doesn't offer any help. Instead, he turns and surges at the now wide open Lucas.

As Lucas lunges forward, coming back from a fall against the beaded curtain, Liam attacks. He comes out of nowhere, meeting Lucas' middle and sending them both to the ground – intentionally, this time. In a fluid movement, Liam presses Lucas to the floor, growls in his face, and then resurfaces.

Liam towers over Lucas. His chest rises and falls with heavy breaths, jaw jutting out to bear and accommodate his lower fangs.

Lucas doesn't get up to fight again. He's had plenty of time to recuperate. If he was going to strike again, he would have by now.

That fresh scent of relief floods the space, but it doesn't last long.

Without warning, a blaze of fiery light burns through the near-empty club. Kira's eyes are flames and the orange aura of a fox encloses her. Her sword is held high and ready. She charges forward, foreign words passing through her lips.

Her blade is slicing through the air, it's coming down at Lucas. Lucas, whose eyes are still dark, but with whites returning to the corners and distinct difference between pupil and iris. Lucas, who isn't fighting anymore. Lucas, who might be innocent.

"Kira!" Scott yells, grabbing her wrist and stopping the swing mere inches from Lucas' face.

The aura doesn't disappear right away. Kira pivots towards Scott, and Isaac is finally moving to his feet. He's readying himself to do the unthinkable. He's readying himself to attack Kira.

But then, the fox-shaped fire fades. It disappears. Kira lowers her sword on her own accord and Scott lets go of her wrist.

Lucas isn't moving. He might be unconscious. Isaac can't tell. He just knows that the fight is over. Fangs and claws retract.

"Is everyone okay?" Scott asks, looking from person to person.

Isaac lets his own eyes take a lap around the club. Liam, Kira, and Scott are all unharmed, but Brett isn't. There's a nasty slash across his center, one that must have been inflicted before their arrival. Mason is on his knees next to Brett, leaning over and applying pressure to his wound. It feels like a groundhog's day situation. Once again, Isaac and Scott were a little too late. Once again, the chimera evaded them. Once again, someone got hurt.

This time, it was Brett instead of Lydia. But, still, when Scott's question is asked, Brett gives a weak, "Yeah. I'm okay."

And he will be. There's a silver lining in the quick healing of a werewolf.

Isaac turns his attention over to Scott. Their eyes meet. Isaac can see the paranoia there, the anxiety, the worry. Isaac can see Scott's eyes flick to Kira every few seconds – cautious, conflicted, confused.

Scott doesn't say a word to or about Kira. Instead, he says, "We need to get him out of here." Then, "Isaac, give me a hand."

Isaac complies, moving to grab Lucas' feet while Scott grabs his arms. Isaac tries not to think about Jackson in the body bag. He tries not to think about Scott losing his grip and the thunk of Jackson's top half hitting the ground. He tries not to think about how badly it went last time. Mostly because, if he does, he might laugh, and it's too

inappropriate a time for that.

A metal spike pierces Lucas' center. It comes out of nowhere – a punch of blood and a mortal wound.

Then, just as unexpected, the spike is removed. It's pulled out by a string of wire, reeling back toward the weapon that fired it. And, when Isaac looks up to the source, he sees three masked figures.

The atmosphere around them seems to crackle and glitch. It burns fuzzy and, when Isaac breathes in, he tastes metal on his tongue and there's a fizzing sensation in his lungs.

"Why did you do that?" Scott calls. He's not afraid. He's angry and upset.

The masked villain in the center speaks. His voice is low and rumbling, almost a gurgle in his throat. It sounds manufactured, generated not by human means, but by something even stranger. The masked villain in the center speaks, and says, "His condition was terminal."

"What does that mean?" Scott says, a little quieter, but still staring up in intensity.

The masked figures turn to walk away. They're almost entirely covered in a bronze-like metal, and, when they move, it clicks and clacks. They stomp with heavy feet and bring static to the air and make a noise like pulling back the bristles of a comb.

Scott doesn't let them leave. He yells again, "What does that mean?"

The masked men look back. The center figure says, "Failure."

Then, an electric spark ignites on either side. The explosion fills the air with smoke and drops of flame.

When it clears, the masked figures are gone. They've vanished. They've disappeared into the darkness. They've faded into the shadows.

Isaac feels sick with dread.

—

As everyone else leaves Sinema, Isaac hangs back with Scott. Partly because Scott was his ride, and partly because he doesn't want to

leave him alone.

“You don’t have to come back to the hospital with me,” Scott says.

Isaac hums.

Scott squints at him. Again, he says, “What does that mean?” (Though, it’s much kinder this time, much less frantic.)

Isaac pauses to think for a moment. Eventually he says, “I don’t mind coming with you.”

Scott cracks a smile, head tilting back in a slow nod-like movement, as if he’s figured something out. He says, still smiling, “You’re worried about me.”

Isaac shrugs. He pays no mind to the stutter of his heart. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No,” Scott says with zero hesitation. He doesn’t elaborate, though Isaac kind of wishes he would. Instead, Scott says, “I really am okay going by myself. You should get home, I bet Derek is worried.”

Isaac nods. He’s still a bit unsure, but Scott’s definitely right about Derek being worried. So, he says, “I’ll give Derek a call, that way you don’t have to drive me back to the loft.”

Scott agrees and Isaac retrieves his phone from his pocket. He doesn’t bother walking away from Scott for the appearance of privacy. He doesn’t feel like he needs it.

Derek answers after the second ring, “*Hey, what happened at the club? Are you okay?*”

“Yeah, I’m good. I’ll give you the full update later, but... can you come pick me up?” Isaac asks. Scott is watching him, something peculiar happening in the brown of his eyes.

“*Only if you tell me why,*” Derek says, completely undermined by the sound of his keys already jingling in the background. “*Is Scott okay?*”

“Yes, Scott’s fine,” Isaac says, flashing a small grin to the boy beside him. “He just needs to go back to the hospital, so it’s easier if you come pick me up.”

“*Easier for who? ‘Cause it’s certainly not easier for me,*” Derek complains. Isaac can hear the ding of the elevator doors.

He huffs a laugh. "I'm sending you the location. See you soon."

"So *presumptuous*," Derek mutters. His car unlocks with a familiar beep. Then, a whispered, "*See you soon.*"

Isaac is still smiling when he hangs up. To Scott, he says, "Derek's on his way."

Scott nods, but he doesn't leave. He stays firmly rooted at Isaac's side, even as the night air grows colder and they're losing precious sleep by the second.

"You don't have to wait with me," Isaac says.

"I'm not going anywhere," Scott protests. "I can spare ten minutes."

Isaac looks at Scott. Standing so close, their height difference seems more pronounced than ever. Isaac has to look down to meet Scott's eyes, and Scott is looking up at him through his lashes. It's dark out, but night vision is a beautiful thing, allowing Isaac to see the full expanse of eyes like melted chocolate, like the comfort of something so familiar.

"You're worried about me," Isaac says, voice barely a breath of sound.

Scott shrugs. "Yeah."

Again, he doesn't elaborate, but, this time, Isaac doesn't mind. The quiet stretches between them, warm despite the weather and comfortable despite the circumstance.

Isaac is the one to break it with a lingering thought of, "Kira..."

Isaac doesn't finish his sentence, but he doesn't have to. Scott just purses his lips and nods. He releases the tension with a soft sigh, looking up at the sky when he says, "I don't know what's going on with her."

Isaac doesn't say anything more. The stress in Scott is saturated, bright and obvious and unmistakable. Isaac doesn't want to add to it. They can talk more about Kira another time.

Isaac doesn't want to add to Scott's tension, but he does *need* to say just one thing. He *needs* to say it, to make it as clear as the night sky above. He waits until Scott's eyes drop down from the heavens. Then, Isaac says, "It's not your fault." And, unnecessarily, he adds, "What

happened to Lucas.”

Scott shakes his head. “I should have done better.”

Isaac puts a hand on Scott’s shoulder, leaning down and a little closer, forcing straight-on eye contact. He says, “You did the best you could.”

Scott’s lips part, and he looks like he’s going to say something else, but then a familiar car engine grumbles and bright headlights shine a spotlight on their moment. It pulls them back. Isaac’s hand falls and Scott’s mouth closes.

The clear night muddles with something unspoken – unresolved.

Novel Approach, A

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 5

Word count: 9,555

Upon arrival at school the next morning, Isaac shoots off a text to Stiles: **Didn't find anything in Derek's books. How did it go at the library?**

Isaac stands in the hallway, waiting for a response. He watches the typing bubble pop up and disappear, pop up and disappear, pop up and disappear. After the fourth disappearance, the bubble doesn't resurface and Isaac's notifications remain empty.

It's strange, but Isaac brushes it off. He pockets his phone and tells himself that Stiles must be waiting to answer the question in person. Maybe they did find something, and maybe it's too confusing to explain in a message. Stiles hates sending long text messages. That must be it.

Isaac spots Lydia. With a smile, he cuts a diagonal line across the hallway, joining her at her own locker.

"Hey, Lydia," he says. "Good to have you back."

She smiles back at him. "It's good to *be* back."

"How're you feeling?" Isaac asks. He pointedly keeps his eyes locked with Lydia's, doesn't let them drift down to her midsection, even though he desperately wants to check for signs of injury.

"I'm okay. A little sore and a little worried I might pop a stitch, but other than that," Lydia gives a small shrug.

"That's good," Isaac says, nodding. Then, "I took some notes in Art History. Not sure if they're to your standards and you probably don't even need them, since you know e—"

"Thank you, Isaac," Lydia says, genuine in her gratitude. Her smile grows a little wider.

Just as the conversation is falling into silence, Malia approaches the

pair. She's a little jittery and intense. She doesn't even say hello. Isaac can't tell if it's just her usual brand of *a little too much for most people* or if something's actually wrong.

"Hi, Malia," Lydia says, stretched out just a little, inflection tilted as if to gain her attention or ask a question.

Malia blinks. "Hey."

"Did you and Stiles find anything in the library yesterday?" Isaac asks, thinking about the unanswered text.

"Uh, no. Well, I don't think so. I left before Stiles did," Malia says, seeming almost uninterested. Like an afterthought, she adds, "He says he's sick today."

That *could* explain the missing reply, though it does nothing to quell Isaac's worry. Still, he just says, "Right."

"But I did find something, just... not at the library," Malia says. "I – So, I went to Tracy's house. Which, I know, active crime scene, bad, whatever. But look at this," She reaches into her bag, pulling out a book with a dark green spine. When she turns it over, Isaac is met with the familiar sight of three masked figures.

Lydia takes the book from Malia. She reads off the cover, "*The Dread Doctors* by T.R. McCammon."

Lydia's head tilts to the side, and, in the slightest of movements, her eyebrows draw together in soft confusion, mouth open just so. There's a focus in her expression, faraway and thoughtful.

"What?" Isaac asks her.

"I don't know," she says, eyes not leaving the cover. "There's something about it." Then, with a glance up at Malia, "Has anyone actually read it yet?"

"Just me. And I didn't understand *any* of it," Malia says.

Isaac and Lydia spare each other a quick look. Lydia's lips form a line, cheeks lifting and eyes crinkling with the motion, "We should probably all read it."

"Kira's working on that," Malia says.

Isaac leans closer to Lydia, getting a better look at the book. "What

about the author? This T.R. McCan – McCammon person?”

“I told Stiles about the book last night. He couldn’t find anything about the author. He thinks it’s a pen name,” Malia answers. Because *of course* it would be a pen name.

Lydia turns the book in her hands. She reads off the blurb, “In a small New England town, teenagers are taken in the night and,” her words go less public speaker and more unsettled, “buried alive.”

Oh god.

“Days later, they emerge transformed, wreaking havoc and spreading terror, commanded by an ancient order of parascientists known only as... the Dread Doctors.” Lydia swallows. She looks up from the cover, but not fully. Her eyes stay trained on a random spot across the hallway, captivated by a swirl of thoughts and realization.

“Well, that sounds *vaguely* familiar,” Isaac snarks. He looks at Malia, “How does it end?”

“It doesn’t,” Malia says, ominous in her nonchalance. “This is supposed to be volume one.”

“Oh, let me guess—” Lydia rolls her neck back against the locker, eyes lifting to the ceiling, and, in an impressive display of satire, “there is no volume two?”

“I think we’re *living* volume two,” Malia says.

“Then, maybe the real question is: is this a novel or... someone’s prediction?”

Lydia opens the book, leafing through the pages until, suddenly, she stops. Her heart spikes.

“Lydia?” Isaac tests.

“Look at this,” Lydia says, holding out the book for Isaac and Malia to see. “Look at the acknowledgements page.”

Malia whispers as she reads, “For providing scientific perspective and invaluable insight, this book is dedicated to Dr. Gabriel Valack.” Malia flicks her eyes back up to Lydia. “Do you know him?”

“Yeah...” Lydia breathes, voice tight. “And I know where to find him.”

“Where?” Malia asks.

Lydia doesn’t say anything. She’s staring intensely forward, something dark and a little scared swimming in the green of her eyes.

“Lydia, *where?*” Malia repeats.

Lydia blinks up, head swaying in the almost shake she often does. Once again, her lips purse, but, this time, they open with a soft click and a sigh of, “Eichen House.”

Aptly, the only thing Isaac feels is stone cold *dread*.

—

During their free period, Scott and Isaac sit outside. September is drawing toward a close, but it’s not quite cold yet. At least, not for two werewolves. They stay mostly quiet, Isaac working on math problems and Scott idle and still.

“Someone’s taking the bodies,” Scott says after a while.

“Huh?” Isaac says, only half listening as he erases a miscalculation.

“Isaac,” Scott says, and then he waits. He waits for Isaac to set his pencil aside and lift his gaze. “Tracy’s body is gone from the animal clinic and Lucas’ went missing from the morgue.” And, again, “Someone’s taking the bodies.”

“And you don’t know who it is?” Isaac confirms.

Scott shakes his head, says, “I – I don’t think it’s the Dread Doctors.”

Isaac laughs. It earns him a very confused, almost glare from Scott. Isaac pulls it back, and says, “Sorry, sorry. It’s just. That is the *stupidest* name I’ve ever heard. We can’t really call them that, can we?”

“Do I need to remind you of ‘shadow men?’” Scott retorts, fit with air quotes and all.

Isaac groans. “Would you let that go?”

“No,” Scott says, smiling in that sweetly innocent way of his. Except, in this light, it’s anything but genuine.

“It was a very appropriate name, and,” Isaac counters, “given that *I* was attacked first, *I* get naming rights.”

Scott's smile turns to a light laugh. "All right, Iz."

"Yeah, see! You wanna talk about lack of creativity? *You're* the one that calls *me* Iz," Isaac complains, fully aware he's whining just a little.

"Is there something else you'd like me to call you?" Scott asks, chin tilting back and staring at Isaac with expectant intensity.

Isaac goes quiet. He clears his throat. "Uh."

"Admit it," Scott says. "You like when I call you Iz."

Isaac's stomach twists and he can't pinpoint why. He huffs, deflecting, "Maybe, but you're getting off topic. *The bodies*, Scott."

"Right, this tangent was definitely my fault," Scott teases, but he lets the tension melt away. He changes the subject and refocuses. "Anyway, the Dread Doctors – yes, we're calling them that – killed Tracy and Lucas, and then left. So, why would they come back for their bodies hours later?"

Isaac pauses.

"What?" Scott asks.

"No, it's just—" Isaac sighs. "Are we *certain* Tracy and Lucas are dead? I mean... Jackson, Derek, Braeden," he counts off on his fingers. And, "Do you want me to keep going? 'Cause I can."

Scott sighs, "I guess we don't know for sure, but the lock on the animal clinic was broken from the outside. Meaning: someone broke *in*."

"Well, that's just great, isn't it? Another thing to add to the list of unknowns," Isaac grumbles, definitely being overly pessimistic.

"I know Stiles isn't here today, but you really don't need to fill in for his persistent negativity," Scott says, but he's not being critical. He's grinning, enough to break through the angst.

"Sorry," Isaac exhales, laughing a little. Then, "Are we going to try to talk to Dr. Valack?"

Scott's smile drops into a frown. "I think we kind of have to."

Isaac nods. It's exactly the answer he was anticipating. "Well, I've got work after school, but let me know the plan and I'll meet you

wherever.” Then, “Do you understand derivatives? I don’t think I’ve ever been more confused in all my life.”

At the comic store, Isaac stands behind the counter, bored and a little distracted. His phone is on, set to ring at any notification, but he’s restless with the knowledge that a plan could be enacted any moment. And all he’s doing is working in an almost empty store.

Ding.

It’s not Isaac’s phone. It’s the sound of the door opening, the quiet ringing of the bell. Theo Raeken enters the store.

His eyes roam over the shop, taking in the layout of comic stacked shelves. Then, his attention lands on Isaac. His expression flits into surprise, eyebrows lifting and mouth curving into one of those constant smiles.

Isaac doesn’t smile back, but he does stand up straighter, pressing up from where he had been leaning over the counter.

Theo approaches, “Hey, Isaac. I didn’t know you worked here.”

“Yeah, well, here I am,” Isaac says, unable to hide the disdain in his tone. Theo might have saved Lydia’s life, but Isaac is still wary. He’s still unsure how to categorize Theo: trusted or *untrusted*.

Theo senses Isaac’s callousness – not a difficult feat – and his smile falls. He sighs. “Look, I know you don’t trust me but–”

“It’s not that I *don’t* trust you,” Isaac interjects, feeling a little bit sorry. He remembers how it felt to be on the outside looking in. “I just want to protect my friends. I... I *have* to.”

“I understand that,” Theo says, nodding. For a moment, it looks like he’s going to walk away, like he’s going to return to whatever task brought him here. But then, he exhales again, and says, “I know I’ve been open about coming back to Beacon Hills for Scott. And also for Stiles. But. I remember you too, Isaac.”

Isaac doesn’t really know what to say to that. He lands on, “Okay?”

Theo’s smile resurrects, though it’s softer this time. It’s almost sad. “I haven’t said anything before because it’s – it’s hard to talk about, but I

remember you and..." Theo cuts his eyes to the side, like he's debating whether or not to finish the sentence. In the end, he does. "And I remember Camden."

Isaac wishes he hadn't finished. Hearing his name is like a punch to the gut. Isaac wants to double over, wants to cave in on himself, wants to hunch over and protect his fragile heart. He doesn't. Instead, he stays stock still. And, again, "Okay."

"Sorry, I shouldn't have brought it up, I just." Theo reaches up like he's going to run a hand through his hair, but then aborts the movement – probably remembers the gel. "I've never known someone who could relate to what I went through with Tara. I came back hoping for a pack that could give me that. I... was hoping for a redo."

"A redo?" Isaac asks, not understanding.

"I remember hearing the news that Camden died." *There's that name again.* "It was almost a year after Tara. I always wanted to say something to you."

"Why didn't you?" Isaac asks. Not because he's bitter, not because he resents Theo for something he *didn't* do six years ago, but because he's curious. And because it's easier than speaking about Camden directly.

"I was scared, I guess," Theo says, shrugging. "I didn't know you very well before, so I didn't know how you'd react to a near stranger bringing it up. And, well, okay. After, you... you kind of... shrunk?"

"What do you mean?" Isaac asks. He doesn't need to ask. He knows exactly what Theo means. He knows what happened after Cam. He knows he turned numb and quiet. He knows he became a shell of himself. He knows he became a victim. He knows the freezer began not long after. He knows all of this, but, still, he asks.

"You – You wilted. You never smiled and you were practically mute and... I knew what that was like. I remember the first months following Tara. I remember how *empty* I felt, like my chest was hollowed out and." Theo breathes. "I told myself I'd reach out when you seemed ready, but then... I moved before that ever happened."

Isaac sighs. He wants to scrub a hand over his face, he wants to crumple to the ground, he wants to turn his back on Theo. "I'm pretty sure that still hasn't happened."

Theo's smile turns to one of sympathy, and, now, Isaac really wants to

turn away. He forces himself to stay rooted and steady, only rolls his shoulders back and clenches his fists at his sides where Theo can't see.

"Not sure it's happened for me either. I mean, why do you think it's taken me nearly a month of being here to say something to you? I—" Theo's hand comes up again, but it doesn't go for his hair. It lands on his chest, rubbing over his heart in gentle circles.

"You don't owe me anything, Theo," Isaac says, allowing his voice to be soft for the first time throughout the exchange. "Just because you lost your sibling before I lost mine doesn't mean you're responsible for taking care of me or whatever."

"I know I'm not part of the pack and I understand why trust is hard for you, but I'm not bringing this up because I feel *obligated* to. It wouldn't be worth the pain – for either of us – if that was the case. I just... I feel like we could help each other," Theo says. Then, before Isaac can respond, he continues, "It happened around this time of year, didn't it? I always have a hard time when the weather turns cold."

Isaac knows September is dwindling away, but he hardly knows what day it is, not with the chaos that has come again. His phone is sitting on the counter between them, so he clicks it open to check.

September 21.

It crashes over Isaac like waves breaking on the shore. Over and over. Again and again and again.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

The sound of the door draws Isaac's attention. He pushes aside his long division chart and steps out into the hallway. He follows the sound of Dad's heavy work boots with his own quiet, sock clad steps.

Isaac peeks around the edge of the maroon arch doorway. He's getting taller and it makes it harder to hide, but he doesn't mind it. He hopes to be as tall as Cam one day. Maybe even taller, if he's lucky.

And he doesn't have to hide. There's no reason to, but he doesn't want to get dragged into a conversation with a chatty neighbor. Especially not the Whittemores.

Curious, Isaac watches as Dad opens the door.

There are three men on the doorstep. They're wearing uniforms, not unlike Camden's, but different too. Fancier, maybe.

When Isaac finally looks up from his phone, Theo has gone from the shop without buying or browsing, but Isaac hardly notices. He didn't know it back then, but those three knocks altered the course of his life forever. Everything that's happened since can be traced back to that house call.

September 21, 2006. The day Isaac found out Camden died. It's been six years. It feels like a lifetime.

—

Isaac had almost forgotten. The day had almost passed just like any other.

He can't let that happen.

Isaac is the last surviving Lahey. He's all that's left. He's alone in sustaining Camden's memory. Isaac survived, and so, now, it's his responsibility to hold onto Cam. It's his job to keep their love alive. It's his burden to carry. It's his gift to cherish.

Isaac is all that is left. He's the last connection to his brother's memory. Isaac can't let that go. He can't let it escape. He can't let it fade.

Isaac has to remember. Even though it hurts, he has to. On this one day, Isaac has to indulge the pain. He has to let the waves pull him under. He has to keep the fire burning.

He has to. No one else will. No one else *can*.

It *has* to be Isaac. He has to remember.

Isaac stands behind the counter, shaken and a lot distracted. Isaac looks out at the display of comics, the randomly placed action figures, the **SALE** sign in the window.

"Get ready because I'm about to change your life," Camden says, leaning against a metal bar and pushing open the glass door.

A bell rings overhead.

Camden steps inside, splaying out his arm in a sweeping gesture, one that means, ta-da!

Isaac trails inside. He feels the rush of air as the door closes behind him, followed by the rush of excitement in his stomach. It swoops inside and breaks out of his body in an awed sort of grin.

“Whoa.”

There’s another ding, but this one comes from Isaac’s phone. It pulls him out of the memory, jarring him back to the present moment. As he resurfaces, the comic store seems to dull, sunshine dimming and colorful pages fading.

Isaac can’t stand here anymore.

He looks around the store. It’s nearly empty, only one customer and Isaac’s boss. She’s in the back corner, shelving comics from a cardboard box. Isaac approaches.

“Hey, it’s – it’s pretty quiet today,” Isaac stammers, aware of the way his voice sounds weak and dark with emotion. “D-Do you mind if I clock out early?”

“That’s fine, but,” Christine frowns, “are you okay, Isaac?”

Isaac only nods.

Christine owns the comic store with her husband. They’re probably around Melissa’s age, maybe a little older – Isaac can’t always tell. He just knows that they’re kind and understanding and definitely a little apprehensive about Derek.

“Are you sure?” she asks.

“Yeah,” Isaac whispers. “I’m all right.”

Christine nods, and Isaac turns to walk away. He unpins his name tag, silences his phone, and exits the store with a final ringing of the bell.

—

Isaac walks. He doesn’t really know where he’s going, just lets his feet carry him on. He ends up outside the movie theater, which only makes perfect sense.

Isaac stops in his tracks.

The memory is a little blurry now. Isaac can’t remember what poster caught his eye – maybe something with Superman, or possibly an

early Spider-Man. Isaac can't remember, but he remembers what happened next.

"You can't just stop walking, Isaac. If you get lost under my supervision, Dad will never let us leave the house again. You know how paranoid he's been since Mom—" Camden circles back to where Isaac has stopped, finally noting what grabbed his attention in the first place. "You think this is cool?"

"Yeah," Isaac says, looking back and forth between Cam and the poster. "Really cool."

"You haven't seen nothing yet," Camden says, toothy grin newly straightened from the braces he got off last month. Isaac kind of misses the crooked smile, but this one is just as bright and adoring. Cam ruffles Isaac's hair like he always does. He tugs on a curl, and says, "Come on, I have to show you something."

That's how they wound up at the comic store in the first place. That was the start of Isaac's love for comics and superheroes. It started with Camden. And, for a while, Isaac dreamed of his own origin story and his own superpowers. Those dreams had died with Camden, but fate is a tricky thing.

Here Isaac is, ten years after his first trip to the comic store, with his own origin story and his own superpowers. Little did he know, his story was a tragedy. Little did he know, he had to lose his hero to get here.

—

The memory of Cam's smile brings Isaac to the playground. The same one he and Lydia escaped to many months ago. Isaac follows their same path down to the swings and takes a seat.

When he came with Lydia, he rocked gently back and forth. This time, he swings like he's a little kid again. The wind whips past him and whistles in his ears. His long legs graze the ground with every downturn, but then he lifts up towards the sky and he feels like...

"I'm flying," Isaac laughs.

That was the first time Isaac broke an arm. He was overzealous, and leaped down from the swing at its greatest height. He learned his lesson pretty quickly. He hit the mulch hard and his arm snapped, clean and painful.

Camden's smile vanishes instantly. He starts frustrated, a bite of, "Isaac, what the hell!"

That's the angriest Isaac can ever remember seeing Camden. It didn't last long, he softened as soon as he noticed Isaac's tears, but, at the time, Isaac thought Camden was mad at him. Now, though, Isaac knows better. Now, he recognizes that Camden was mad at himself – *blamed* himself for the injury.

Camden was *always* looking out for Isaac. He was *always* keeping him out of harm's way.

And, now, Isaac feels a sharp pang of *guilt* at the notion that he had Camden to protect him while Camden had no one. Camden had to be the hero for the both of them.

"It's okay." Camden wipes the tears from Isaac's cheeks. "You're okay."

Isaac jumps down from the swing. The harsh impact has nothing on werewolf joints.

—

Isaac and Camden didn't spend a lot of time at home. They would browse the comic store, they would go to the playground, they would spend time in the backyard (slathered in sunscreen because healing wasn't as magical back then). Isaac has a feeling this worsened after their mom died, but he can't be sure. His memories of before are too fuzzy and vague.

Because of this fact, everywhere Isaac walks, there's a memory. He stops outside an ice cream parlor. He doesn't go inside, but, with enhanced senses, he can smell the sweet aroma within.

Isaac remembers how they would come here after every victorious swim meet. Isaac, Camden, and Dad. Isaac remembers the ridiculous superman ice cream Camden would order and his own rich chocolate. He remembers how Camden would laugh as it stained his face. He remembers how, in 2006, after they won state, the routine had been broken. Dad invited the swim team over, didn't even mention ice cream. He remembers how Camden had pulled Isaac aside, masking the moment like a celebratory hug, and whispered, *"We'll go tomorrow. Just you and me."*

And they did exactly that.

"I have a confession," Camden says.

"Did you cheat? Is that how you won?" Isaac asks, but he's only joking. He knows Camden is a great swimmer, better than Isaac ever would be.

Camden mimes like he's going to launch a spoonful of ice cream at Isaac. He doesn't actually do it, only manages to make his own fingers sticky and bring a smile to Isaac's face.

"No," Camden says, shoving his spoon back into the unnaturally bright mixture of red, yellow, and blue.

"Well, what's the secret?" Isaac asks. He's curious now. He knows Camden doesn't tell him everything. He knows he's just his kid brother, too young to be included all the time. But Camden always makes an effort. He ropes Isaac in whenever he can, and Isaac feels like he's flying every time.

Camden leans in close, pitches his voice to a whisper, and says, "I don't even like this flavor."

"What?" Isaac squawks.

It earns him a harsh, "Shh!"

Isaac laughs. "You've been ordering it for years. How can you not like it?"

"Well, I don't know. I thought if I ate enough of it I'd become a superhero too," Camden says. Isaac might be Camden's kid brother, but he's eleven. He knows Camden is mostly joking now too.

Isaac plays along. "Don't you think you've eaten enough to at least like it by now?"

"No, no, it gets worse every time," Camden says, stirring his spoon in the ice cream. "But I think I've come up with a new way to become a hero..."

Camden's voice has shifted. He's being serious now. Isaac inches his chair closer, melting chocolate forgotten. "What is it?"

"I'm going to enlist," Camden says. "After graduation, I'm going to be a soldier. I'm gonna be a hero."

Isaac considers telling Cam the truth: that he already is a hero. But then, he sees the glimmer in Camden's eyes and recognizes this for what it is. Camden is asking for Isaac's permission. He would stay if Isaac asked, but he can't ask that of him. It wouldn't be fair.

So, Isaac just says, "Awesome."

Camden smiles, all of his straight white teeth on display. "You think so?"

"Mhm," Isaac hums and nods around a spoonful of ice cream.

Camden grins even more, and repeats, "Awesome." Then, "No one knows yet, so it has to stay a secret, okay? Just for a bit."

Isaac nods again and they link pinkies like they're little kids.

Outside the ice cream shop with sugar clogging his senses, Isaac wonders: if he knew then what he knows now, would he have played it any different?

—

Isaac ends up in their old neighborhood. As soon as he realizes it, he wants to turn and run. But, if he gives into the impulse now, he'll never come back.

He needs to do this.

Their old house is empty, Isaac knows. It's been a year and a half since his dad's murder, but the horrors of the Lahey household became local news, and, consequently, no one has wanted to move in.

Isaac hasn't been back since the night his dad died. He knows Derek has been here since then, when he went to get Isaac some of his own clothes. Isaac likes to think that's when Derek found out about the freezer, though he knows it was likely long before then. He's also pretty sure Scott and Allison were here once too, but he pretends he doesn't know about that.

Isaac doesn't go inside yet. He needs to warm up to it. Instead, he rounds the back of the house. To the pool where he learned to swim, to the pool where Matt Daehler drowned. It's closed off with a plastic blue cover, but it doesn't matter. The sight still sends him back in time.

Camden splashes at Isaac, which is really unfair considering Camden is tall enough to stand while Isaac is stuck treading water. Still, he tries to splash back.

Camden laughs. "I bet I can hold my breath longer than you."

"You wish," Isaac bites back.

They go on a count of three. Isaac squeezes his eyes shut tight, stills the muscles of his legs, and drops under the water.

Isaac holds his breath until it starts to hurt and then he rushes up to the surface. He gasps for air, legs flailing underneath him. Camden is still under, and, by the looks of it, he'll have no trouble staying down for a good few seconds more.

"I thought you were practicing your strokes?" Dad asks. He's standing on the edge of the pool, but he's smiling a little. When he sees Isaac's frown, he adds, "Don't sweat it, kid. He's got bigger lungs than you. You'll be as good a swimmer in no time."

Isaac smiles back. Dad winks and then walks away again, headed towards the house.

When Cam resurfaces, he makes a big stink about winning, laughing and showing off and taunting.

"Dad says you just have bigger lungs," Isaac grumbles.

"Dad says," Camden mimics in a high-pitched, whining tone. Then, he grabs Isaac by the middle and throws him up in the air. It's no more than a few inches of height, but it feels like more than that.

Isaac splashes down under the water again.

Isaac never did get to be as good of a swimmer as Camden, but he doesn't mind as much as he used to. He doesn't care that he never met his dad's expectations because he knows, without a shadow of a doubt, Cam would be proud of the person he's become.

Isaac wouldn't call himself a hero, but, by any definition, Camden would. That thought gives Isaac enough courage to walk through the door and into his childhood home.

—

Isaac doesn't even think about entering the basement, but he does *think* about going into Camden's room. In the end, he can't bring himself to do it.

Instead, Isaac enters his old bedroom. He knows that, at one point, he felt safe here, but it was so long ago. Now, stepping inside, the strongest memories are ones of fear and guilt and grief.

Isaac pushes those memories down. He's not here for himself and he's not here for his dad. He's here for Cam.

Isaac moves around like he's exploring a stranger's room because, truthfully, that's how this feels. Isaac doesn't recognize the person who lived here. He feels like he's exploring a history museum exhibit.

He pulls open the drawer of his old desk. There's dusty school supplies inside: pencils with erasers worn down to nothing, a ruler, some stray index cards. There's nothing of note, so Isaac moves on.

He opens his closet door. There's clothes inside, but, again, nothing that feels like it belongs to him anymore.

He grabs a random book from his shelf. When he opens it, a piece of paper flutters to the ground. Isaac's body goes cold. His blood runs through his veins like a current of ice and his heart goes frozen, barely beating.

Isaac kneels down to the floor. He picks up the piece of paper, but stays low. He sits, leaning against the bookshelf even as the wood digs uncomfortably into his spine.

Isaac unfolds the sheet of paper. Instantly, tears spring to his eyes.

Happy birthday, Isaac!

I'm sorry I couldn't be there to celebrate with you in person. Did you know we've spent each and every one of your birthdays together? I was even there right after you were born. Obviously you don't remember it, but I do. You screamed so much, but always went quiet when the nurses ran your head under warm water. Dad was so excited about that, thought maybe it was a sign you were going to be a swimmer, but I'm pretty sure he was just scaring you into silence. Anyway, I think maybe that's why I always mess with your hair. You were weird even then. Nice to know some things never change.

I've told my unit it's your birthday soon. We're going to sing for you on the day, even though you won't be here to hear it.

I wanted to send you a lengthy letter for your birthday, but I'm not very good at writing. I don't know what more to say other than: I love you and I miss you.

I guess I should also say thank you. I think maybe you think since you're the little brother that you don't have an influence on my life, but you do. I

wouldn't be the same without you.

I'm proud of you. I'm sad I can't be there to watch you grow up, but I know your future is bright.

Happy birthday.

— Camden

P.S. You don't need ice cream or a uniform to be a hero.

Isaac found out Camden died five days before this letter arrived. He had been twelve for four days when he first read it.

—

Isaac can't stay here, he knows. If he does, he'll shrink. He'll wilt. He'll wither.

And it's already begun. The tears spill down Isaac's cheeks, the letter droops in his slack and gentle grip, the dust from the bookshelf collects in his hair.

Empty.

Isaac feels empty, but it's not numb. It's an ache, once dull and ever present turning sharp and alive. It echoes in his chest. It ricochets through his body again and again and again. There's no stopping it.

Isaac can't stay here, he knows. If he doesn't get up now, he never will. He'll freeze. He'll rust. He'll decompose.

There's sensitive scar tissue around Isaac's heart and someone has just dug in with piercing claws, but he doesn't bleed. There's nothing to give when Isaac's like this.

Hollow.

Isaac doesn't feel empty, he feels *hollow*. Everything inside him is shrinking, wilting, withering. He's turning inwards, he's making himself small, he's collapsing. The pressure is too much. It's not concentrated, it's not an attack on his lungs or his heart. It's everywhere. It's all consuming. It's a cave in.

Isaac could stay here, he knows. He could live in this pain forever. He could live in this memory. He could live in the words of this letter and the messy handwriting.

He could stay here, but he won't. He can't. He has to get up.

Isaac wipes his tears. He pretends he can remember how Camden's fingers felt on his cheeks. He pretends he can remember his voice, his reassurance, his comfort.

Isaac can't feel it, but he can remember a hand ruffling his hair. Isaac does the same now. He disguises it as an attempt to dislodge the dirt and grime, but, really, he just wants to feel that thrill again.

Isaac stands. He can't feel Camden's presence, but he remembers what it was like. He remembers exhilaration. He remembers happiness. He remembers flying.

Isaac folds the letter and pockets it.

—

For the first time all day, Isaac knows where he's going. He leaves his childhood home and walks with purpose. The trek isn't long, but his hesitation is. It's a convenient location – a deliberate decision – but, when Isaac reaches the gate, he waits.

Somehow, this is harder than the house was. Maybe because there are more known names here than unknown. Or maybe because this is where everything changed.

Beacon Hills Cemetery.

Isaac's first job and the Lahey family legacy. The place he met Derek and the spot where his father is buried.

Isaac takes a deep breath, like he's preparing to dive, and opens the gate. The creak of metal is loud in the heavy silence, but Isaac pushes through it. He steps over the threshold.

Exhale.

Isaac continues in his purposeful stride. He doesn't stop or linger. He presses ahead with focused tunnel vision. He walks right past his father's grave and doesn't even shudder or blink. He's never visited him and he's not starting now. Not today.

Today, Isaac only cares about one name.

Camden V. Lahey
November 23, 1987 — September 21, 2006

Son, brother, hero.

Isaac sits in front of the headstone, cross-legged and crying again. He presses his hand to the cold stone. He traces his fingers over the smooth engraved letters of, *C-a-m*.

Six years. It feels too short and too long. Isaac feels like a completely different person now. He feels changed, not just in species, but in heart. He feels like his molecules have rearranged. He feels so far away from who he used to be. He feels unrecognizable.

“Hi, Cammy,” Isaac whispers, faint and private. “I’m sorry it’s been so long.”

Isaac can count on one hand the number of times he’s visited Cam’s grave. Even as the years passed, the pain stayed fresh. A weeping willow sprouting inside, branches growing and spreading and hanging overhead. It never got easier, so Isaac went numb to it. He pulled the roots from the ground. He worked in this cemetery, but his eyes swept right over granite.

Isaac visited only when he was too weak to stay away – on holidays or anniversaries or when spring bloomed and the weeping grew back. Isaac tried not to visit because he didn’t trust himself. He didn’t trust the grief and what it might make him say, what wretched words it might pull from his lips.

Isaac stayed away, but now he’s here. He’s sitting at Camden’s grave and he doesn’t have any flowers. Willowing teardrops and timid words are all he has to offer.

“I miss you,” Isaac says. His next breath comes as a wet laugh. “I have so much to tell you, but it’s all kind of unbelievable.” He snuffles. “No, I – I know you would have believed me.”

There’s too much to say. Isaac wants to bleed out on the gravestone. He wants to spill, wants to pour from his lips like shining liquid silver. He wants to overflow. He wants to tell it all, but he won’t. There’s nowhere to begin, so he won’t start at all.

Isaac’s not sure where his beliefs lie. He can only hope that, somehow, Camden *knows*.

“I love you,” Isaac says. He’s still not used to the words. Most days, they feel foreign and out of place, but not here. Here, with Camden, it feels the most natural thing in the world. It feels familiar.

Isaac tips his head back. He looks up at the sky. It's still light out, but only just. He should move on, but he's not ready. He has more he *needs* to say.

"It's not your fault." Isaac's voice is so quiet he can hardly hear it himself. "I don't blame you. For any of it. Okay?" Isaac pauses, like he's actually waiting for an answer. Then, "I'm sorry you didn't have someone to protect you."

Isaac wonders how well he really knew his brother. He wonders how alone he must have felt. He wonders.

"You didn't need ice cream or a uniform or claws and fangs to be a hero," Isaac whispers still. "You were always mine."

Camden was a superhero. Isaac believed it back then, and he still believes it now. Cam was the best of them.

"Wherever I end up, no matter how much I change, just—" Isaac hitches forward with a sob. "You're the start. No matter what, you're always the reason. You get all the credit. I..."

Isaac doesn't name them, but he thinks of every person in this graveyard. He thinks of them as sculptors. He thinks of their hands and hearts and words, thinks of them molding Isaac. He thinks of them tearing him down to nothing and starting from scratch. He thinks of rebuilding again and again and again until he gets it right, until he fits their image.

He thinks of the fragility that comes with being satisfied. He thinks of the vulnerability in turning meldable clay into something sure and certain and easily broken. He thinks of chipped shoulders and rough edges and permanent imperfections. He thinks of scar tissue.

He hears footsteps.

Isaac doesn't move on – he's not ready – but he does turn. Still sitting with his legs all folded up, Isaac looks over his shoulder.

It's Deputy Parrish.

Except, he's not in uniform. He wears a soft looking t-shirt and a dark denim jacket and, most importantly, he's coming right towards Isaac. Or maybe the most important part is the bouquet of flowers – poppies, Isaac thinks. He counts six of them.

Parrish gently lays the flowers against Camden's tombstone.

For a long moment, nothing happens. Everything is still. Isaac stares at Parrish and Parrish stares at the grave and they say nothing. Isaac's mind is blank, his thoughts have stopped racing. Everything is quiet.

Parrish looks down at Isaac. Isaac keeps looking up at him.

Then, Parrish takes a seat. He sits down right next to Isaac, gaze turning forward and legs twisting and crossing. His knee lightly grazes Isaac's.

"I knew you looked familiar," he whispers.

Isaac chokes and swallows. He's still looking at Parrish, maybe a little awed. When he speaks, it's not a question. "You—" Isaac clears his throat. "You were in the military."

Parrish nods.

"You knew Camden." Again, it's not a question.

"He always was going on and on about his curly haired brother," Parrish says, his voice going a touch fond, "little Izzy."

Isaac can't help his smile. It's wet and emotional. "I almost forgot he used to call me that."

"How?" Parrish asks, a little incredulous. "He hardly called you anything else. Maybe if he had, I... Maybe I would have put the pieces together sooner."

"Maybe," Isaac says, but then the tears come stronger. They stream down in his face in rivulets of pain. Sobs break through his body in heaving jolts of relief. It's everything all at once. A spinning storm of heartache and connection, a hurricane forged by years of unfelt grief and the purest form of *release*.

Parrish presses his knee a little firmer into Isaac's, but he doesn't offer any other comfort. Isaac appreciates it. Just the simple touch is enough. Anything more would be too much. Even the gentle point of contact feels like a bolt of lightning, feels like a shared spark screaming in his bones, screaming, *not alone*.

Parrish knew Camden, and something in Isaac lifts. It's an automatic response, an immediately loosening of the knots wound so tight for so

long. Isaac isn't alone in the memory anymore.

The dam breaks and Isaac floods the grave. It all comes out at once, everything restrained and pent up and held back. He lets himself feel. He lets himself be weak. He lets go.

—

It takes Isaac a long time to stop crying, but, when he does, it's with a strained, "Sorry."

"Don't apologize," Parrish says, sounding calm, if a little concerned.

"It's just – It's been so long since anyone else really remembered," Isaac says. "It's been so long by myself."

Parrish doesn't say anything for a moment. He gives Isaac the space and time to make an attempt at pulling himself together even. It's a valiant effort on Isaac's part, but, in the end, his eyes don't stay dry and his hair is a lost cause. In the end, the storm rages on.

In the end, Isaac gives up and Parrish gets to his feet.

"Come on," he says. "It's getting dark. We can go to my apartment to talk some more?" Isaac doesn't follow or agree or utter a word. Parrish quickly tacks on, "Or I could drive you home. It's up to you."

"No, I—" Slowly, Isaac looks up at him again. "I want to keep talking. If that's okay?"

Parrish nods, "Wouldn't have offered if it wasn't."

Isaac casts his eyes towards the grave. It looks a little nicer with the flowers, a little softer. He leans forward, close enough that the ends of his curls tickle the top of the stone, and drags his fingers over the shape of the letters, *d-e-n*.

Then, he falls back and moves on.

—

Parrish makes coffee and Isaac doesn't have the heart to turn it down, so he braces himself for the bitter taste and treasures the warmth of the mug occupying his unsteady hands.

After a few minutes of quiet, marked only by the sound of swallows and Isaac's sniffles, he asks, "How well did you know him?"

“Well enough,” Parrish says, shrugging. “Camden made an impression, I guess.” He stares down at his cup. “I didn’t know he was from Beacon Hills when I moved here. When I found out, I – I thought maybe that’s why I felt drawn here.”

“Maybe it was both,” Isaac says.

They both know it wasn’t. They both know exactly why Parrish ended up here, but it’s nice to pretend, even just for a moment.

“What was he like?” Isaac asks.

Parrish stares at Isaac for a long moment. Five, ten, fifteen seconds of silence. Then, “You knew him better and longer than I did.”

Longer, sure, but *better*...

“Just – What was he like in the army?” Isaac asks, affixing a clarification to make the question seem a lot more reasonable and a lot less terrified.

Parrish takes his time considering the answer. His eyes drift, like he’s sifting through memories. “He never stopped pushing himself. He was always trying to do more, like – like everything was a competition.”

To Isaac, that just sounds like their father and his unmeetable expectations, like that’s what got Cam killed. His next breath comes a little shaky.

“But it wasn’t like he had something to prove, it was more like... like he was trying to make someone proud.”

To Isaac, that just sounds like, *you*. He was trying to make *you* proud. His eyes sting and all he can manage is, “Oh.”

“And he had a *phenomenal* bullshit detector,” Parrish says with a light chuckle. “Got him in trouble quite a few times, but also made him such a great person to have around. He never accepted surface level answers. When he asked you how you were, he really wanted to know. He – He listened.”

To Isaac, that just sounds like more of Camden being strong for everyone else. He takes a sip of the coffee, almost appreciating the way it scalds his throat. “Cam took care of people. He didn’t know how to do anything else.”

Parrish hums, like he doesn't quite agree. "It's... It's hard to explain to someone who hasn't experienced it, but, in the military, your unit becomes your support system, like your family."

To Isaac, that just sounds like, "Your pack?"

Parrish's eyes lock with Isaac's and his expression tilts into a small smile. "Yeah," he nods. "Exactly."

To Isaac, that just sounds like, *not alone*. He warms from more than just the coffee.

"When my dad died, it – it felt like all the connections had been severed," Isaac says, forcing himself to maintain eye contact even as his hands tremble enough to swirl the milky brown of his mug. "Like, all at once, my ties were cut. It was... It was like withdrawal."

Parrish doesn't speak. He knows Isaac isn't finished, so he waits. He's patient.

"To me, Camden's time in the military always felt like this – this brief tragedy," Isaac says. "It was less than four months, barely a fraction of the near-twelve years I spent with him. And," Isaac sighs. "He – He only ever sent three letters."

Isaac sets his mug down on a ceramic coaster, scrubbing over mostly dry eyes a little frantically. Parrish still doesn't say anything, but he makes a soft noise in the back of his throat. It's sympathetic and worried.

"Cam is—" Isaac coughs. "Cam was seven years older than me, so," his voice is scratchy and tight, "I knew there were things he never told me. I knew there were parts of his life that I knew nothing about. And, I guess I thought... that was it? Like. I knew everything I would ever know and I would never learn anything new. I..."

Isaac looks up, tears pooling.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know," Parrish says. "As..." he waits until Isaac meets his eyes, then, all in one breath, "long as you promise to confirm or deny his ridiculous stories."

Isaac's response comes in the form of a soft, wet laugh. He doesn't say it, but he doesn't have to. He knows that, to Parrish, it just sounds like, *thank you*.

“Deal?” Parrish asks.

Reassurance takes over. It doesn’t smooth his chipped shoulders or mend the hairline fractures, but it fills. The dug out grave in Isaac’s chest fills with something new. Something that feels a lot like acceptance.

“Deal,” Isaac says.

—

As Isaac drains his mug, awareness starts to return. He’s not sure if it’s the caffeine or the company, but, slowly, he wakes up out of his one track mind.

The first thing he does is use his sleeves to dry his face. If not for werewolf healing, his skin would probably be rubbed raw. Instead, it’s only puffy and likely a little red and blotchy.

The second thing he does is ask for water. Parrish brings him a glass and Isaac downs it in all of four swallows. It soothes the phantom scratching in his throat and cools the lingering heat of coffee.

The third thing he does is check his phone. Ten missed calls, six voicemails, and thirty-seven text messages.

Predictably, most of the notifications come from Derek, Scott, and Stiles. Having no shame, a whopping twenty-three of the texts are from Stiles, but the other two don’t fare much better. So, Isaac ignores what he knows will be a slew of frantic typo-filled messages and focuses on the two texts from Lydia.

I’ve told them repeatedly that you’re probably just at work and not checking your phone, but, if you could, please respond to one of us. Scott and Stiles are doing my head in, says the first message, delivered at 9:14.

Then, thirteen minutes later, a second follows: We’ve just arrived at Eichen. We have to give up our phones (Stiles is trying to fight it, but I don’t see him having much success). You can still meet us here. Hope everything’s okay.

Isaac checks the current time. It’s 10:42. It’s been well over an hour since Lydia’s messages and the group’s arrival at Eichen House.

Shit.

“Everything okay?” Parrish asks, unaware of how fitting his word choice is.

“Uhh,” Isaac gives. “Not entirely?”

Parrish sits up a little straighter, pushing forward to the edge of the couch. “What’s going on?”

“I forgot I was supposed to go to Eichen with the others,” Isaac says, rubbing over his arm. “I mean, I’m sure it’s fine, we were just—”

“Eichen House?” Parrish repeats, voice warping with panic.

It takes Isaac a beat too long to remember. The last time Parrish was at Eichen House he was saving Lydia and Stiles from being murdered.

“Y-Yeah, but don’t—”

“Are they still there?” Parrish cuts him off again.

Isaac looks back at his phone. He doesn’t have a single message dated after 9:27.

—

Parrish desperately and repeatedly jams the button of the intercom, saying, “Hello? Anyone there? This is Deputy Parrish with the Beacon County Sheriff’s Department.”

Isaac combs through his disheveled hair, foot tapping in impatience. Time is ticking forward. The time-stamped messages are gaining on the two hour mark. It’s too long. Something’s not right.

All that’s in their way is a gate. It’s ridiculously tall with metal spikes lining the top, but, still, Isaac thinks, *I could scale that*.

So, stupid and reckless, Isaac steps past Parrish and closes his fist around one of the iron rungs. He’s preparing to hoist himself up when, unexpectedly, the gate falls ajar. It’s unlocked.

“That shouldn’t be—”

Isaac doesn’t stick around to hear the end of the sentence. Tension winds tight, tight, tight. And then, the gate cracks and... *snap*. The tension releases and Isaac shoots forward. It’s out of his control. It’s a full on sprint. It’s go, go, go.

Isaac makes it to the top of the steps just as the front doors burst open. There's a rush of light and an electric buzzing and a silhouette in the doorway – two bodies, one holding the other and both crackling with lightning. Isaac takes one look at the silhouette and knows.

“Scott!”

Isaac runs forward as the silhouette staggers. They make it down a small section of steps before crashing in a heap of smoke, char, and familiar grunts. The impact knocks them into two: Scott and Kira, separated only by an inch of space.

Isaac's knees meet the ground, reaching out to–

“Scott.”

He looks terrible. His skin is speckled with a thin coating of black dust, there's a fresh burn on his cheek, and he's quivering all over. But his heart is beating and, even through the dark, his brown eyes shine.

“Isaac.”

Electricity fizzles.

—

Everything's okay.

All they really gained from the excursion is an increased urgency to read the book and further confirmation that nothing good ever happens at Eichen House, but, for the most part, everything is okay.

No one asks Isaac where he was or why Parrish is with him. Maybe they're too preoccupied or maybe Isaac looks bad enough to be spared an interrogation, but he's sure the silence is only temporary. They'll bring it up eventually.

Scott, when he's less covered in ash, will ask Isaac if he's okay. Isaac will cave to the words and tell him everything and Scott will listen and really care.

Stiles, when he's less distracted, will weasel the truth out of Isaac. It will be awkward for all of three seconds, and then they'll share an honest discussion and both be better for it.

Lydia, when she's less tired, will figure it out on her own. She still won't say a word about it, but she'll know and Isaac will know that

she knows.

They'll all find out eventually. It's inevitable, but not immediate. For now, no one asks and Isaac doesn't explain. For now, they head their separate ways.

Parrish drives Isaac home to the loft. He pulls up outside the building, but Isaac doesn't get out of the car yet. He knows he needs to say something. He needs to put some kind of cap on the shared evening they stumbled into. All he can come up with is a quiet, "Thanks, Parrish."

Parrish smiles and says, "You know... you could call me Jordan. I think we're there."

Isaac modifies, "Thanks, Jordan."

"Weird, but I'll allow it," Parrish says, face twisting up in overcompensated disgust.

Isaac knows what he's doing. He's keeping it light, he's deflecting, he's giving Isaac permission to move forward. Isaac is grateful for it, but it won't matter. Isaac knows what Derek is doing too. He knows Derek will be waiting up for him, worried and scared. Isaac knows he'll have to hash it out with Derek, but he doesn't mind. He's ready for it.

With that, Isaac exits the car and enters the building. He takes the stairs, too worn out for anything else, and, as expected, when the loft door opens, Derek is waiting for him. In an instant, he's on his feet, but he doesn't move towards Isaac.

"Where were you?" Derek asks. There's no anger in his voice, only pure concern. "I went to the store, but Christine said you left early, and then I tried to follow your scent, but the trail just ended."

Isaac spares a single second for the thought of his old house and the realization that his scent must still linger there, enough to keep him hidden. Then, quiet, he says, "I'm sorry. I should have – I should have texted you."

"What happened?" Derek asks, paying no mind to Isaac's apology.

"Um." Isaac takes a step further into the loft, closer to Derek, but not quite bridging the gap. He wants to, but he knows he needs distance for the next words. He won't be able to say them up close. "It's, uh, it's the anniversary of Cam's death."

Derek is on him in seconds. His arms wrap around Isaac, cradling him to his chest, gentle and comfortable and known. The rest of Isaac's tension unwinds as he goes slack with the embrace, thawed and melting into Derek.

"You could have told me," Derek whispers into the hug. "You didn't have to be alone."

"Well, heh, I wasn't, actually. I... ran into Parrish at the cemetery. Turns out he knew Camden in the army," Isaac says. It still doesn't feel real. "You owe him a thank you. I'm pretty sure I'd still be there if he hadn't shown up."

"I'll send him a card," Derek says, still speaking low and muted. Somehow, when he continues, it's even softer, "You know, he was only a grade above me in school."

Isaac's response comes as a quiet sob.

"Okay, it's okay, we won't talk about it now," Derek hushes, gentle in his words and the hand rubbing Isaac's back.

It goes silent again. They stay like that for a long time. Isaac thinks Derek is waiting for him to be the one to break the hold, but he doesn't want to lose this peace. And so, they stay there.

After a while, Derek says, "I'm glad you're safe."

Isaac doesn't break away completely, not yet, but he pulls back enough to meet Derek head on. They're barely hugging anymore, mostly just standing in each other's space. "Now you know how I feel when you disappear for weeks."

For a second, Derek looks like he's going to protest, but then he deflates, "Yeah, okay, that's fair."

Isaac smiles. Derek ruffles his hair. Isaac tries not to cry.

"It's after midnight, so," Derek pauses, "happy birthday."

Required Reading

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue (and book excerpts) from season 5 episode 6

Word count: 8,046

Warning: canon typical child abuse

Chapter Notes

I know Isaac's birthday is sometimes listed as February 27th, but The Hunt said it was September 22nd so that's what we're going with

Isaac knows the letter isn't there anymore – he tucked it in the drawer of his bedside table along with Allison's ring dagger – but he can still feel its weight in his pocket. He can't decide if it's a comfort or an agitation. Either way, it's a distraction. Isaac feels off kilter. He feels distant. He feels numb.

Isaac should get to class, but instead he stands in the upper-level outside hallway, drinking in the brisk sunshine. It brings a small flush to his skin and helps to brighten his awareness. It's here that Scott approaches.

"Hey," he says, taking up a spot next to Isaac, though he doesn't look at him. Scott leans against the banister, staring down at the students meandering below.

"Hi," Isaac says in turn. He keeps Scott in his peripheral vision.

"How are you feeling?" Scott asks.

He's talking about Camden, Isaac knows. As predicted, Scott called last night. And, even more predictably, Isaac told him everything. (Well, not *everything*. He didn't mention his birthday.) He told Scott about the anniversary, the literal trip down memory lane, and the run in with Parrish. He told Scott because he asked and because he wanted to. It wouldn't feel right if Scott didn't know.

That doesn't make the question any easier to answer.

Isaac runs nervous fingers over the painted metal of the railing. He

sighs. “I don’t know. I think because I... because I almost forgot, I think it was harder. I wasn’t prepared for it.”

Isaac’s been feeling that way a lot recently. Unprepared. Like the horrors of his past won’t stay buried, like the ghosts creep up on him without warning, like he’s always stumbling to readjust. It’s not a nice feeling.

“That’s okay,” Scott says. “You don’t have to know what you’re feeling, just—” He finally looks directly at Isaac. “Just make sure to actually *let* yourself feel it, whatever it is. We’ve got so much going on right now, it’s really easy to tuck things away, but it...”

Scott’s sentence trails off into nothing. His mouth twists in thought, like he doesn’t know quite how to articulate his point. Isaac’s not sure it matters. He gets the gist of it.

“So...” Isaac drags out, voice slipping into something light and a little teasing, “what you’re saying is: don’t *bury* your feelings because they’ll come back worse than they started?”

Scott’s eyebrows drop and he levels Isaac with an unimpressed stare fit to rival Derek’s. “I know what you’re getting at and it’s not funny.”

Isaac laughs anyway.

Just as the mood lifts, Theo joins them. “Hey. Am I interrupting?”

Scott’s eyes flick to Theo for a brief moment, but they quickly fall back to Isaac. His head tips to one side and his brows raise, expression open, as if to say, *your call*.

To Scott, Isaac gives a slight nod and an even slighter smile, *I’m okay*. Then, to Theo, he says, “No, you’re fine.”

“Actually, speaking of things being buried and crawling right back out,” Scott says, segueing ridiculously, “there’s something I should tell you both.”

Isaac spares a glance toward Theo, nerves ticking up.

“There were eight new holes found on the lacrosse field,” Scott says. They’re royally screwed.

“*Eight?*” Theo repeats, incredulous.

“Yeah. Eight,” Scott confirms, sounding only marginally less terrified.

“Which means, there are eight teenage chimeras and they’re likely at school. We need to keep an eye out.”

“For what?” Isaac asks. “What’s the precedent for a chimera? What are the signs?”

Scott shrugs, “Corey said Lucas was suddenly more confident, more aggressive. And Tracy was... was stuck in a night terror and freaked out enough to seek help from Ms. Martin.”

“So, basically, we’re looking for abnormal behavior?” Theo asks.

“Anyone acting a little weird,” Scott says, returning his eyes to the crowd of students arriving on campus.

“Isn’t everyone a little weird in high school?” Theo says. He might have a point. Abnormal behavior could present in dozens of ways and have dozens of explanations. The parameters really aren’t much help at all.

“Yeah,” Scott breathes, nodding. It’s all a little hopeless.

Isaac, trying to give a boost of morale, says, “Maybe when we have more data, we’ll find a common trait in the chimeras. Like a pattern?”

“What? So we wait for more teenagers to turn into killers?” Scott asks, voice and eyes darkening into disapproval.

Isaac shakes his head, maybe a little too quickly. “No, no, I didn’t mean, I—” Isaac exhales. “They don’t have to kill someone to reveal they’re a chimera.”

“Right,” Scott nods. Like he’s not sure if he agrees with the statement, but he understands Isaac’s sentiment.

Theo looks between Scott and Isaac, something assessing in his gaze. Isaac doesn’t like it.

“And you’re really going to read the book?” Theo asks. “You do remember Tracy went on a killing spree after reading it?”

Scott pauses. His eyes turn on Theo, watching him like he really values his opinion. It sets Isaac on edge in a way he can’t explain. Scott asks, “You think it’s a bad idea?”

“I think Malia almost getting run down by a car could’ve been bad,” Theo says, not hesitating to share his opposition. Scott and Isaac don’t

have anything to say to that. There's no argument to make. "That's why you guys haven't finished it, right?"

Scott gives Isaac his eyes. It's a weighted stare. It's almost a question and almost a stand off, like they're waiting each other out, like a high stakes game of chicken. Isaac's got a feeling no one really *wants* to read this book, but no one has any alternative either.

"We're going to," Scott says eventually.

"Scott, I – I came here hoping to *find* a pack," Theo says, protest lingering. "I wasn't planning on watching one fall apart."

Scott is really listening to Theo. He's giving him equal opportunity to speak his mind, wants everyone to feel heard and valued, but he won't be swayed. He *can't* be influenced by fear because, "The book's all we've got."

Theo recognizes the strength of Scott's conviction, recognizes that he won't be able to get through to him. So, he says, "Then I'll read it too."

There's a moment of surprise. As much as Theo says that he wants to be part of the pack, that he wants to help, he doesn't *have* to offer. They haven't exactly welcomed him with open arms and things haven't exactly been stable since he arrived, and yet he's stayed. He doesn't *have* to. He doesn't have the same commitment and obligations as Scott or Isaac or the other pack members. No one expects him to help, and yet he continues to do so.

"I'll print another copy," Scott says. Then, he reaches out to squeeze Isaac's shoulder and adds, "I gotta get to class. See you later."

Isaac nods and smiles. "See you."

Scott walks away, leaving Isaac and Theo alone together. It's quiet for a moment, just Theo looking at Isaac, eyes narrowed and lips twitching in an amused sort of smile.

"What?" Isaac asks, unsure about the attention.

"No, nothing, it's just..." Theo hums and haws around it for a moment, then, "Scott really treats you like you're *his* beta. Even though you're not. Liam is."

Isaac doesn't know what to say to that. "Uh. Yeah, I guess."

"It's a good thing, Isaac," Theo says, still with that tickled, infuriating smile. "Don't overthink it."

Isaac doesn't have that ability.

"Anyway, listen, I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I kind of overheard some of what Scott was saying earlier and... I'm sorry if I upset you yesterday. It wasn't my intention," Theo says. His smile falls away and he fades into something almost sad.

"It's fine, Theo," Isaac says, and he's genuine in his forgiveness. "I needed to remember."

—

Isaac goes to his first class of the day. It's one he shares with Stiles. Isaac expects to be hit with an onslaught of questions, but, instead, he's met with silence. Stiles sits beside him, mouth shut and quiet, eyes glassy and faraway.

"Hey," Isaac says. Stiles jumps a little. "Malia said you were sick yesterday. Are you feeling better?"

Stiles flusters for a moment, lips parting and closing in rapid succession and blinking just as quickly. "Uh—" Stiles clears his throat. "Yeah. I'm good. Just a cold or allergies or something."

Stiles' heartbeat doesn't jump, but it doesn't stay steady either. It's as restless as the rest of him. He seems to be trying to stay perfectly still, his usual animation subdued, but he's fidgety nonetheless. He's on edge.

There's something Stiles isn't telling him, but Isaac doesn't ask. Partly because he doesn't want to and partly because he doesn't get a chance.

"Where were you yesterday?" Stiles asks, tone going a little accusatory. "We were – *I* was worried."

It's so early in the day. Isaac knew the questions would come, but he's barely had a break. First, it was Scott. Then, it was Theo. And, now, Stiles is dragging it up too. Isaac can't handle it all. He needs to catch his breath.

"I don't want to talk about it here," Isaac says, hoping Stiles will understand. "Not at school."

Stiles frowns, but he doesn't push. Isaac wonders if it's because he respects Isaac's boundaries, or because he has his own secrets and knows he can't force Isaac's hand without forfeiting his own.

It's probably both.

Isaac sits in Mr. Yukimura's classroom, waiting for the class to begin and trying to read more of *The Dread Doctors*. It's not going very well. His mind keeps drifting.

Lydia appears before him, green sweater somehow managing to *not* clash with red hair. ("Strawberry blond," Stiles' voice echoes in his mind.) Lydia's got one hand looped across her abdomen – likely a subconscious, protective move – while the other holds a white spiral notebook.

"Here," she says, placing the notebook on Isaac's desk, covering the book print out. "Thank you for your notes. They..." Lydia's head teeters, "were actually quite helpful."

"Always the tone of surprise," Isaac huffs. On the outside, he deflects, but, secretly, on the inside, pride blossoms at her approval. Isaac doesn't know when he started to care what people thought of him. Though, considering it's only *certain* people, the shift probably happened around the same time he started caring *about* them. (The pack, obviously.)

Lydia smiles, but doesn't move on. She stays standing in the aisle next to Isaac. "Well, go on," she says, hand gesturing outward, "open it."

Isaac's face wrinkles in confusion. Wary and skeptical, he runs his thumb over the fore-edge of the notebook, listening to the quick sound of pages rippling and rustling. Naturally, his thumb catches, meeting the obstruction of offset weight. Isaac lets the notebook drop open.

There, nestled between the pages, is an A7 card, decorated with pink balloons and a neat swirl of, *Happy Birthday!*

Isaac immediately slams the notebook closed. The movement sparks a flash of memory. Something like the slamming of doors and the blowing of paper horns. Isaac ignores the flicker, brushing it off with a slight shake of his head.

"How did you find out?" Isaac hisses, leaning over his desk.

In one movement, Lydia's eyebrows pull together while her shoulders draw up towards her ears. Confused and only a little judgmental, she says, like it's obvious, "My mom's the guidance counselor."

Isaac deflates, falling back in his chair. "Just – Don't tell anyone."

Lydia rolls her eyes. She finally moves to her seat behind Isaac, complaining, "I seriously don't understand what is with you people and keeping your birthdays secret. What's the big deal? You're eighteen! That should be exciting."

Isaac lifts his eyes to the ceiling. He thinks of uniformed men at his door on his three hundred and sixty-fourth day of being eleven. He thinks of a twelfth birthday spent crying until he lost the contents of his stomach and he lost his voice. He thinks of the last words he ever received from Camden, wrapped up in a birthday card.

Probably a little cruel, Isaac says, "Aren't you the one who poisoned your friends and brought Peter back from the dead on your seventeenth birthday?"

"Rude," Lydia hmphs, "but... fair." There's a beat of silence. Then, whispered, "Happy birthday, Isaac."

—

As the sun sets over Beacon Hills, Derek drives himself and Isaac to the McCall household where they're meant to meet up with the rest of the pack.

"Okay, explain to me again why I have to read this book?" Derek says, inflection tipping in a question.

"I don't know the exact science, but Stiles and Lydia said something about it triggering the memory sensors of the brain?" Isaac says, though his voice sounds just as confused as Derek's. "Basically, if we've encountered the Dread Doctors and they've done something to us, then the book will help us remember. I guess."

Derek looks like he wants to bash his head into the steering wheel. "This is ridiculous. You realize that, right?"

"Yeah, but the book's all we've got," Isaac parrots Scott's earlier words.

They're trusting a guy who drilled a hole in his own head. The entire

plan is ill advised and foolhardy, but they're willing to try anything at this rate. They're desperate now. They're throwing things at the wall and *hoping* that something sticks.

Eight copies of *The Dread Doctors* are splayed in a messy circle on the coffee table of the McCall house living room. The books are enclosed in a second lopsided ring of eight grave faces, all reflected in the glass of the table, an image of what they're doing this for. Eight teenagers turned supernaturals.

"My mom's book club usually has more wine," Lydia says, slicing through the quiet tension.

"Well, they also probably didn't read books that cause violent hallucinations," Stiles says, keeping his gaze on the table until the very last syllable. Then, he looks up at Lydia, base level anxiety exacerbated in the context.

"That's why Malia's here," Scott says, smiling at her across the table.

The hope is: doing this together will *increase* their odds of actually finishing the book and *decrease* their odds of violence.

"So none of us go running into traffic?" Kira asks, voice soft. There's an implication there.

Scott picks up on it, nodding and admitting, "Or worse."

Isaac thinks of Tracy.

"Like what happened to Judy," Malia says, igniting confusion all around. As they all stare at her in question, she gives a simple, unhelpful explanation of, "Chapter fourteen."

"Maybe I should have my mother read it," Lydia says, leaning forward and picking up the original copy of the book. "She might remember a girl with a tail leaping off the ceiling and," she looks at Stiles, "attacking everyone."

Her tone is bitter and sarcastic, but Isaac hears the truth in it. Her mom really doesn't remember and Lydia really wishes she did.

"If it works," Stiles says, which, of course, is the big unknown.

Lydia fixes her eyes on the book's cover. She goes quiet and sober, "It

has to.”

“What does that mean?” Scott asks, noting the shift in demeanor.

Lydia’s next breath comes a little strained. “I think I... saw them during my surgery.”

The words bring stunned silence, everyone recognizing the weight of the statement and wondering what it could mean.

“When I look at the cover of the book,” Lydia’s voice takes on that sickly sweet quality it often finds when she’s nervous, “it’s almost like...”

“A memory trying to surface,” Theo fills in the blank.

All eyes turn on him. There’s no question, there’s no uncertainty, there’s no waver. Theo locks eyes with Lydia and he speaks with confidence.

Lydia looks back at him. “Yeah.”

“Isn’t that what Valack wanted when he wrote it?” Derek asks.

He gets only a few nods of answer.

“If they did something to me...” Lydia pauses, mouth parted open and jaw shifting to one side, “I wanna know what it is.”

Lydia takes a backwards step, breaking the circle and setting things to motion. One by one, they settle in to read until, eventually, the coffee table is empty of books and reflections.

—

Her chest rose and fell again and again as she sucked air into her lungs. As the adrenaline began to wear off, Judy felt her eyes sting with tears. She looked away from the twisted remains of the creature that was once her friend as a wail escaped her lips.

“Anyone feeling anything yet?” Scott asks. He’s sitting on the couch next to Isaac, book held in his hands, but eyes gazing out at the group.

“Bored,” Isaac says. It makes Scott’s lips twitch.

“Tired,” Kira adds.

“Hungry,” Lydia finishes.

“I think he meant the book,” Theo says from where he sits in an armchair.

Lydia looks over at him. Isaac notices a slight annoyance in her eyes, but it’s merely a flicker, gone as quickly as it arrived. Isaac doesn’t think much of it. Like most of the pack, Lydia takes a while to warm to people and, even then, she doesn’t skimp on the judgment.

“Maybe we should make some coffee,” Derek says.

From there, Isaac continues reading.

With a labored step, Judy turned toward the open door at the end of the walkway. Blood pounded in her ears every step of the way like the droning of a great cloud of bees.

Malia’s voice carries in from the kitchen, drawing Isaac’s attention and pulling him out of the novel. “*I can smell the blood. What happened?*”

Isaac tries to keep his focus on the page in front of him, but, honestly, *anything* would be more entertaining than Judy’s sob story. And, the mention of blood? That definitely sparks Isaac’s interest.

“Jeep died on me again,” Stiles says. “Went to check the engine, the hood fell on it.”

The conversation in the kitchen goes quiet. Isaac waits for three seconds, then decides they must be finished talking. He returns his gaze to the book, but, as he’s trying to find his place, Stiles speaks again.

“Wait, so, how much – how much do you remember anyway? With the accident, did it play like a movie in your head or was it like being completely in it again?”

Curious, Isaac trains his ears with a little more intent.

“*In it,*” Malia answers.

Whatever Stiles says next, Isaac doesn’t hear it. He’s distracted by the heavy feeling of being watched. It makes Isaac’s skin itch. On instinct, he looks up, searching for the culprit.

It’s Theo. Across the room, sitting in the armchair, he’s staring at Isaac. For a moment, their eyes lock and the space between them pulls

taut.

Then, Isaac gets a light smack to the back of the head.

Isaac turns to his right. Derek is sitting beside him, offending arm coming to rest on the back of the couch. He doesn't look up, but he does say, "Keep reading."

Isaac groans.

She pushed the door open until it clanged against the outside wall. Night air filled her lungs and, for the first time in weeks, Judy felt like everything was going to be all right.

—

As the night wears thin and the pages dwindle, tiredness spreads through the room like a plague. The caffeine sustains them for a little while, but there's no postponing the exhaustion. The story drones on and on and, one by one, they drop like flies, falling into sleep.

Isaac tries to keep reading. He knows he's almost into the last chapter, but Derek's arm is a comfort behind him and Scott's presence is a warmth at his side. Isaac is powerless to fight it.

His eyes droop and his head leans back into Derek's open shoulder. A content sound forms at the back of his throat.

Derek jostles his arm in an attempt to dislodge Isaac. He's pressing forward, but Isaac just sinks his weight back, practically nuzzling into him. When Derek doesn't give up, Isaac grumbles, eyes still closed and nowhere near conscious, "You have to let me sleep... it's my birthday."

"It's your birthday?" comes an offended cry from Stiles.

That yanks Isaac up from Derek's arm and back into wake. He opens his eyes. Lydia and Kira are already asleep – Kira upstairs in Scott's room and Lydia in the chair – but everyone else is staring at him.

"Uh."

"Is today your birthday? Why didn't you tell us?" Stiles asks, looking particularly jittery in his seat and, really, he didn't need the coffee to stay awake. They're all enabling him.

Isaac glares at Derek. "This is your fault."

“Well, now you’re definitely not allowed to sleep on me,” Derek says, pointedly scooting as far away from Isaac as the couch will allow, arm dropping off the back.

Already plenty embarrassed and stupidly tired, Isaac turns to his left. He ignores the focused attention from Stiles, Malia, Theo, and Derek. Instead, he looks at Scott. He stretches his neck, pressing into the back of the couch, and peers through his lashes. It’s a little pleading and humiliating and there’s a brief moment where Scott hesitates and Isaac thinks he’s going to refuse. But then, he sighs and inches closer.

Isaac bites back a smile and rests his head on Scott’s shoulder. He keeps his eyes firmly trained on the book and doesn’t dare mention his birthday.

By some miracle, no one says a word.

Isaac finishes the last few pages of the book and then falls asleep on Scott’s shoulder.

—

When Derek wakes him up, the sky is still dark, but it won’t be for long. All around Isaac, the pack is stretching and resurfacing. Groggy, Isaac has to peel his body away from Scott’s, even as everything inside him begs to press closer.

Isaac moves in a daze, guided by Derek out of the house and into his car. He doesn’t fully wake until they’re resetting the lock of the door, coming home for the night.

“Have a good sleep?” Derek asks.

When Isaac looks at him, he finds a teasing glint in his eyes and a slow smirk.

“Shut up,” Isaac bemoans, disgruntled and grumpy and already trudging towards the stairs.

“Wait,” Derek calls out. Isaac halts, swiveling on his heel. “I know it’s not technically your birthday anymore, but I have something for you.”

“Derek,” Isaac whines. “No more presents, the lint roller was plenty.”

Derek ignores his complaint. He enters the kitchen, rummaging around in the drawers. It’s then that Isaac notices a pink box on the

counter.

“You did not,” Isaac says, realization blooming.

“I did,” Derek says. Even with his back turned, Isaac can hear his smile. “Go sit.”

At this point, Isaac knows it’s easier just to play along, so, with heavy feet, he marches over to the table and gets as comfy as he can on a metal stool. He rests his chin on his hand and mumbles, “No singing.”

“Do you even know me at all?” Derek answers back. Then, he turns. He walks to the table, carrying a small plate in one hand while the other hovers in front, equal parts concealing the surprise and protecting the flame.

Derek sets the plate in front of Isaac. There’s a small cupcake, vanilla with chocolate frosting, decked out with too large candles that spell, 18.

“Make a wish,” Derek says.

Isaac looks between Derek and the flickering candles. He ignores the stinging of his eyes – blames it on tiredness – and lets them flutter closed.

To staying hopeful.

Isaac opens his eyes and blows. The flame goes out with a puff. Smoke and sugary cake mingle, scents mixing and pulling at a thread in Isaac’s mind. A memory tickles like a wisp in the air, one that smells like wax and sweet sugar. It disappears as the smoke clears.

“I really shouldn’t have this much sugar when I’m about to go to sleep,” Isaac says.

“It’ll be stale by morning,” Derek says, reaching over to pluck the silly candles from the frosting.

Easily convinced, Isaac caves. He eats the cupcake and Derek sits with him all the while. He yawns twice, clearly tired. His eyes are hazy, not with sleep, but with thought. Isaac can see his mind churning, and, just when he’s about to ask, Derek cracks.

“I never actually fell asleep,” he says. “I just closed my eyes.”

Isaac doesn’t say anything. It’s hardly a revelation, so he knows Derek

isn't finished. For as long as there's still cake, Isaac is content to let Derek go at his own pace.

"Theo didn't sleep either. It was like... he was waiting for me, or something. I don't know. When I finally closed my eyes, I heard him go upstairs," Derek says. He looks unsure in a way Isaac doesn't see very often. It makes him nervous, turns the frosting on his lips bittersweet.

Isaac swallows thickly. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying," Derek hesitates. "I'm saying... maybe we shouldn't let our guard down around him just yet."

—

Isaac hates this. He hates feeling like he's waiting for something terrible to happen. The anticipation is killing him. He's jumpier than he's been since before his dad died. He feels like Stiles.

"What if we need some kind of trigger?" Scott suggests as they burst into the high school. "Wasn't Malia driving when – when she remembered the crash?"

"Yeah, but how are we supposed to trigger a memory that we don't remember?" Stiles asks. And, yeah, that might be an issue.

"Maybe it's a delayed thing," Scott says, hands tapping together. "Maybe you have to wait a couple of hours to see what happens."

Mercifully, no one mentions that half of them finished the book last night – much longer than a couple hours ago.

Overhead, the fluorescent lights flicker in the hallway. They buzz and crackle, flashing for a few seconds before shining on full brightness again.

In unison, Isaac, Scott, and Stiles all slowly turn on Kira. She looks between them and the lights.

"That wasn't me." Kira's eyes are wide and her hands jump at her sides. "I swear."

Isaac's fairly certain none of them believe her, but they don't mention that either.

"We keep an eye on each other today, okay?" Scott urges, intensity

rising.

“Yes, and keep an eye out for eight other potentially homicidal chimeras,” Stiles adds, sounding exasperated and almost impatient.

“*And* keep an eye out for the Dread Doctors,” Kira says.

The four of them look at each other, apprehension multiplying. Scott gives a curt nod. Then, he and Kira branch off towards their own class.

Stiles isn't finished yet though. He calls after them, hands on his hips, “Starting to see the appeal of a third eye!”

Isaac reacts in a huff of humorless laughter. Stiles strides off down the hall without even glancing in his direction. It's a quick exit, one that makes Isaac think that maybe Stiles is trying to avoid him. He should know better by now. Isaac isn't going to let that happen. And, anyway, Isaac *has* to follow Stiles, going in the same direction, but not to the same class.

Thinking about it, Isaac realizes he hasn't seen much of Stiles since Tracy and the start of this chimera business. Sure, they've been together in group settings, but the one-on-one conversations have suddenly dropped to almost nonexistent. Isaac hates that almost as much as he hates the waiting.

So, Isaac trails after Stiles, falling in line beside him. Isaac considers bringing up Theo and what Derek had seen last night, knowing it's a topic that would pique Stiles' interest and get him talking. But then, Isaac notices the increased pallor of his skin and the dark circles under his eyes. The tiredness in his appearance could easily be explained by the late night of reading, but it's too familiar, especially when paired with the sharp scent of anxiety. Stiles seems stuck in his head, stressed more than usual and quiet like he never really is.

“Are you okay?” Isaac asks because he can't help himself.

“I'm fine,” Stiles says, picking up the pace. Isaac doesn't need to hear his heartbeat to hear the falsity.

“You're lying,” Isaac says. He tries not to sound deploring, but it's hard. He doesn't like the discomfort between them. He doesn't know what to do with it. Things with Stiles are usually so easy, but this is anything but.

Stiles stops walking. He crosses his arms over his chest.

For a long moment, neither says a word. They stand in the hallway, repeatedly jostled by the throng of students pushing towards classrooms. They stare at each other, eyes locking. Isaac focuses on staying blank and patient. He hates waiting, but, for Stiles, he does it with ease.

Slowly but surely, Stiles' frustration fades, replaced by a more genuine view, slumped and tired and resigned. "All right, fine," he says, arms uncrossing. "*Maybe* something's going on with me and *maybe* I'll tell you, but not here. Not at school."

It's an unfair turning of the tables, Isaac's own words twisted back on him. He has no choice but to sigh and say, "Okay."

"Okay," Stiles repeats, a little surprised at how quickly Isaac was convinced. Isaac hopes that earns him some brownie points. Then, "I'm going to the hospital with Lydia to try to trigger her memory."

Isaac's face scrunches. "When was that plan made?"

"Right now," Stiles says, smiling something mischievous and annoying. He turns on his heel, awkwardly speed walking away with a call of, "Bye, Isaac. And happy *belated* birthday, asshole."

As Isaac watches him walk away, he has a feeling that, if Stiles has any say in the matter, they're never going to have that talk.

—

Isaac sits through his first class of the day. He tries his best not to fidget. Usually, he's good at keeping still. Or, at least, he's good at twitching in a way that draws no attention and causes no disturbances. Today, that's just not the case. His leg keeps jumping without his consent, his fingers keep picking at his cuticles, and he can't keep his bottom lip out of his teeth for longer than five minutes.

He tries his best not to fidget. He tries to focus on the French lesson and ignore the impending doom, but he's terrible at waiting. It unlocks something small and weak inside him. It makes him restless.

So, when the bell rings, Isaac is the first one out of his seat and into the hallway. He moves just for the sake of moving, pressing ahead and stretching his antsy legs.

Isaac finds commotion spilling out into the hall, concentrated around Mrs. Finch's classroom. His anxiety kicks up a notch.

A familiar scent, short stature, and spiky hair pass in a flurry of motion. Isaac reaches out. He grabs Liam's wrist, pulling the younger boy to a stumbling stop.

"It's Scott," he says.

Then, Liam rips his arm free. He continues pushing in through the crowd of students. Isaac follows.

"I've got it! I've got the inhaler!" Liam calls, running into the room and sliding to Scott's side.

Isaac sees Scott's faraway eyes. He hears his shaky breaths. Isaac sees Liam pressing the inhaler into his hand. He hears him calling Scott's name.

Isaac fumbles back a step.

"Scott really treats you like you're his beta. Even though you're not. Liam is."

At the time, Theo's observation sounded innocent. It almost sounded like a compliment. Now, though, Isaac's not sure. Now, he thinks Theo might have a point. Isaac's *not* Scott's beta. Not really. He's part of Scott's pack, but Scott didn't turn him. Isaac doesn't have the ability to just *know* when something's wrong. He doesn't have that special connection with Scott.

Isaac doesn't understand why that stings.

Maybe it's the fact that Isaac doesn't even have that connection with Derek, the actual wolf that bit him. As many times as Derek has been in harm's way, Isaac has never *known*. As close as Isaac and Derek are, they don't have that bond. Not in the way that Scott and Liam do.

Isaac doesn't understand why that burns.

Isaac sees Scott standing woozy on his feet. He hears his rabbiting heart. He sees Liam holding him steady. He hears his exhale of relief.

Isaac pushes aside the growing ache and, instead, reminds himself that Scott and Liam's connection is a *good* thing. They're both safer for it. That should bring Isaac a sense of comfort.

It doesn't, but he pretends it does.

Isaac finds Scott in the locker room. He's sitting on one of the benches, inhaler held in his hand. He's studying it with a sorrowful scent clouding around him. Isaac doesn't say anything at first, just joins Scott on the bench, sitting in the somber silence. Scott keeps spinning the inhaler in his hand. Over and over and over.

Until, eventually, Isaac reaches out and cups his hand around Scott's. The spinning stops. Isaac applies gentle pressure for one, two, three seconds. Then, he lets go. He pulls his hand away and Scott drops his own to his lap, inhaler tucked into his fist.

"Doing okay?" Isaac asks.

"I got my memory," Scott says, though Isaac had already guessed that.

"Wanna tell me about it?" Isaac asks.

Scott turns his head toward Isaac. Sitting close on the bench and looking at each other like this, there's only half a foot of space between their eyes. Scott looks at Isaac and Isaac lets him.

"It wasn't about the Dread Doctors," Scott says, and, when he speaks, he turns forward again, staring at the floor. Isaac expects Scott to elaborate, but he doesn't.

"You can still tell me about it," Isaac says. "If you want."

Scott stays quiet a little longer, like he's thinking it over. Then, "I had this dog when I was younger. Her name was Roxy. She – She was a stray. I brought her home and... and I think it was right after my dad left and my mom felt guilty, so. She let me keep her."

Isaac nods. He has to force himself not to smile at the memory of his time living with the McCalls, of Melissa's mention of Scott bringing home every stray he found.

"She was so ugly, Isaac," Scott says. This time, Isaac has no control over his smile. It bubbles into a small laugh. The sound pulls Scott's eyes back to Isaac. For a second, he looks offended, but then he smiles too.

"Mom and I took her to the park one day. There was this rabid

doberman,” Scott wheezes. He stops talking for a moment, just to catch his breath. “It attacked me and Roxy, and she was trying to protect me, and. All the stress and panic sent me into an asthma attack. I ended up in the hospital. Roxy didn’t – she didn’t make it.”

Isaac doesn’t really know how to respond. The implications of a *rabid* dog swirl in Isaac’s mind, but he doesn’t think he should put that to words. He’s sure Scott’s already thinking about it, about Argent and, by extension, Allison.

Isaac doesn’t say anything, but Scott doesn’t seem to care. He leans a little closer to Isaac. Their breathing falls in sync.

Things go quiet between them.

It stays that way until the locker room door opens. There’s a burst of sound and chatter from the hallway, though it muffles again as soon as the door clicks closed. Footsteps approach.

It’s Theo.

“You going to be okay?” he asks Scott, voice pitched low and walking over slow.

“Yeah,” Scott says, looking up at Theo. “Um... I think it was just the memory hitting me,” his eyes drift to Isaac, “a psychosomatic thing.”

Isaac pointedly doesn’t think about a school bus in traffic and the first time he thought Derek was dead. (*Was it the second time for Scott? Or possibly the third?*)

Theo doesn’t ask anymore questions, but he doesn’t leave either. He stays, opening his own locker. He doesn’t actually take anything out, Isaac notes. He’s lingering, trying to make himself look busy.

Scott notices it too. “Did you want to talk about something?”

Theo’s eyes flit back and forth, from Scott to Isaac and from Isaac to Scott. He smiles without teeth, just a small display of sympathy. “No, it can wait.”

Theo closes his locker, angling his body towards the door.

“No, no, it’s okay,” Scott says, unable to let a moment like this drop, unable to put his own needs ahead of others. “What’s up?”

Theo doesn’t take much convincing to stay. It annoys Isaac just a little.

“Last night, when you guys all fell asleep,” Theo comes over, sitting on the bench beside them, “I went upstairs to check on Kira.” Isaac realizes this is what Derek saw. He listens closer. “She was sleeping. But...”

“You heard her speaking Japanese?” Scott asks, catching on quicker than Isaac can manage, body straightening in obvious intrigue.

“I didn’t just hear it,” Theo says. He holds out his phone. The volume is quiet, but Kira’s voice is distinct. “*Watashi... wa shi... no shishada...*”

Isaac doesn’t know the meaning, but he recognizes the words. And, if the look on Scott’s face is anything to go by, he does too.

“That’s what she said at the club,” Scott says.

Theo makes a soft noise of surprise. Then, “I found a website that can translate it.” Theo hesitates. “It means, roughly, ‘I am the Messenger of Death.’”

Well. That’s just great.

Scott’s head turns forward again, slow and gradual. His mouth is parted open and he’s blinking rapidly. Isaac knows that look.

“It gets worse, doesn’t it?” he asks.

Scott squirms. He readjusts his legs, head shaking, eyes tipping up to the ceiling. “Uh...” he stammers. “Yeah, something’s – something’s happening to her. She’s got this aura around her. It’s hard to explain.” Scott’s eyes narrow. He swallows, “Um. It’s supposed to be part of her, but now it looks... different.”

Isaac remembers the night at the club. He remembers the fox made of fire, he remembers it like a cage around her, he remembers the flame in her eyes.

“Almost like it’s taking over,” Scott says. “I don’t know. Something’s happening. And, to be honest...”

“What?” Theo asks.

Scott looks between Isaac and Theo. He swallows again, and finishes with, “I don’t know if I can trust her anymore.”

It’s news to Isaac. He knew about the change in Kira’s aura, he knew it was cause for concern, but he didn’t realize they’d gotten to this point

already. He didn't realize the trust was so fragile. He didn't realize it was nearly broken. He—

The lights flicker.

In sync, they stand as one. The lights flash only for a second, but the sound keeps crackling. Scott's head angles down, an intense show of focus, of still listening.

"I hear it too," Theo says.

The thrum of sporadic energy doesn't stop. Water drips. It's coming from down below.

"It's coming from the basement."

—

Together, the three boys race toward the basement. Theo makes it to the stairs first, then Scott, and then Isaac. He descends onto the first step and, suddenly, everything changes.

Suddenly, Isaac isn't in the school anymore. He knows these stairs.

"This is your fault."

There's a bruising grip around Isaac's wrist. His skin is already blossoming with white and red, pressure searing into him – a branding touch.

"I'm gonna have to find a way to punish you," the words are practically spat out in disgust. "I have my responsibility as a parent."

As if being burned, Isaac tries to pull free, but he's not strong enough. (He should be. He should be able to break the hold with ease, but he can't. He can't.)

Isaac has to crane his head to look up at his father. Tears well in his eyes and stream down his cheeks. He whispers, almost begs, "Dad..."

There's a pounding on the door above them. The sound echoes through the basement, followed by the jiggling of the knob. Isaac can hear someone shouting.

Isaac feels like he's going to shake right out of his skin. His heart is pounding so fast he feels like it's going to explode.

"This is your fault!"

Isaac bites down on his lip to hold back a sob, hard enough that his mouth fills with red and the taste of metal. The grip on his wrist goes impossibly tighter and Isaac's scared his bones are going to snap. They've reached the bottom of the steps now and he tries to dig his heels in.

Dad's face is twisted in anger, flushing dark like Isaac has never seen. He's never seen this before. He doesn't understand.

"It's your fault she left."

The pounding on the door goes quiet. The lock breaks. There's a burst of light and then familiar footsteps. There's a second pair of hands on Isaac now, but these are gentle. Gentle, as they break Isaac free from the grip of their dad's calloused and strong hand.

Camden steps between them. He shields Isaac's body with his bigger frame. Cam.

"Isaac!" Scott's roaring voice yanks Isaac out of the memory.

He's collapsed at the bottom of the stairs. His face is wet with tears. His lips part with a breath of, "Cam."

"Isaac," Scott says again, quieter on the second go. "Iz? You with me?"

Isaac's mom didn't die. All this time, she's been alive. She didn't die. She just left. She left them. She left Isaac and she left...

"Camden."

"It's okay, Isaac. It's just a memory, you can't be hurt by a memory," Scott's voice is soothing and warm, but it's just not true. Isaac's wrist still screams with pain and his mind is still aflame with the image of Camden, stark and bright and real. Isaac can feel his gentle touch, he can feel the comfort of his body protecting Isaac's.

"Scott? You need to see this!" Theo's frantic shout carries over to the bottom of the steps.

Scott hesitates. Isaac gives him a small shove. Scott follows Theo's voice.

The memory is crumbling Isaac's foundation. Every moment before twelve years old shifts and shakes under the weight of it all. His mom didn't die. She left. His dad didn't instantaneously snap when Camden died. He always had that monster in him.

It changes everything.

Without this memory, Isaac's childhood is almost normal. Without this memory, Isaac had no fear of his dad, no fear of abandonment, no real reason to ask Cam to stay.

The memory changes everything.

Isaac should feel outraged. He should feel scared. He should feel sad. And he does, he does, he does. But...

Camden was right there. Isaac was in it again. He saw him, he heard him, he felt him. For a brief moment, Isaac got to be with him again. Isaac got a few more seconds with his brother.

He got the impossible.

Scott doesn't stay away long. He comes back to Isaac's side, kneeling in front of him and catching his eye.

"Can I help you up?" Scott asks. He doesn't touch Isaac. He's waiting for permission, Isaac realizes. He's keeping his distance and it's intentional. Scott must know something. He must recognize the basement as the trigger, he must recognize that, of course, Isaac's repressed memory would come back to his father.

"Yeah," Isaac whispers.

Scott's hands are firm on Isaac's side and arm. Isaac tries to help, but, really, it's just Scott lifting him to his feet.

"It's a chimera," Scott says once Isaac is steady.

"Go without me," Isaac says, voice more timid than he's heard it in months. He can't handle a chimera right now. He'll be a hindrance more than a help. Scott won't be able to focus if Isaac is like this.

"I'm not leaving you alone," Scott says.

Isaac thinks he nods, but he can't be sure. He's such a mess. His mind is reeling.

Scott doesn't let go of Isaac as they make their way up the stairs. He doesn't let go as they enter the hallway. He doesn't let go as they see Derek rushing towards them.

"Derek? What are you doing here?" Scott's confusion leaves his lips,

but his hands don't leave Isaac. If anything, he holds a little tighter.

"I pick Isaac up from school, remember?" Derek says, but he's not looking at Scott. His eyes are trained on Isaac. He keeps coming closer until his hand lands on Isaac's shoulder. He kneads, but says nothing.

Sandwiched between Scott and Derek, Isaac starts to feel more alive.

"Scott. The chimera," Theo urges. He's halfway down the hallway, peering over his shoulder and clearly wanting to get a move on.

"Go with Theo," Derek says. "I'll take care of Isaac."

Usually, Isaac might not appreciate being spoken for, but he doesn't care right now. Besides, Derek is right. Scott needs to go.

Still, he hesitates. Scott's arm around Isaac's waist pulls him a little closer. He's staring at Derek with an intensity that Isaac can't place. He doesn't want to leave, that much is clear. But Malia has joined them in the hall now too and she's calling for Scott to, "Come on!"

Scott gives. His eyes meet Isaac's. For a second, he seems to inch closer. Then, Isaac gives a small nod and Scott gives Isaac a final squeeze, and... he runs to join Theo and Malia.

Isaac presses into Derek.

—

Derek takes them back to the loft. Isaac stays quiet until Derek presses a mug of tea into his hand, the same after-nightmare flavor of honey and lemon. Derek sits on the couch beside him, close enough that their knees touch.

"Um," Isaac says.

"You don't have to tell me about it," Derek is quick to reassure. He knocks his knee against Isaac's. "But if you want to, I'm listening."

Isaac takes another long gulp of tea. It helps wash away the too strong memory of blood, drying his mouth and taste sticking to his tongue.

"It was my sixth birthday," Isaac says. It's come back to him now, everything before the basement door slammed and his father grabbed his wrist. "My mom was supposed to pick up the cake, but there was some sort of mix up, like it had some other kid's name on it or something? I don't know, I had only just started learning to read, so it

really didn't matter, but Dad..."

Derek is watching Isaac and paying attention to every word. He lets Isaac take a break, lets him breathe, but doesn't interrupt.

"The details don't really matter. A big fight broke out and I guess it was the last straw and," Isaac's fingers flex around the mug. "My mom left."

"She..." Derek stammers. "I thought she...?"

Isaac looks at Derek and nods. "Yeah, I thought so too."

The words don't need to be spoken. They already know. Until today, Isaac thought his mom was dead.

"The memory was triggered by the basement stairs," Isaac says. He keeps looking at Derek, sees the realization growing in forest green eyes. "That's where it started. My dad was dragging me down to the basement."

Isaac holds his mug in one hand, the other rubbing over his wrist and the haunting ache. He knows the pain isn't really there, knows his bruises heal instantly, but he can feel it. He can feel the grip like it's scarred down to the bone.

"Nothing actually happened," Isaac says because it feels important. Because, even now, he can't stop himself from trying to justify or defend. "He – I don't know what he was going to do. The lock on the basement door broke and Camden ran down and he... he stopped it, he. Derek, he was only twelve."

Isaac breaks.

He doesn't have to say anything else. Derek already knows it all. He knows what the memory means. He knows that it shatters Isaac. It changes everything: his perception of his parents, his childhood, his relationship with Camden. It's all altered. And, now that Isaac remembers, he can't ever forget again.

Isaac lets himself be bundled in Derek's arms. He doesn't say anything else.

Strange Frequencies

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 7

Word count: 6,963

Scott calls before Isaac has made it into bed. It's earlier than usual, but Isaac answers all the same.

"Hi."

"Hey, Isaac. Um. Do you mind if I put you on speaker while I finish getting ready for bed? I shouldn't have called so early, but you looked exhausted earlier and I wanted to make sure I talked—"

"Scott, it's fine," Isaac cuts off the rambling. The worry in Scott's voice stings Isaac's ears, enough that he mercifully doesn't make fun of Scott for doing the same thing Isaac had gotten teased for a few weeks ago. "I still have to brush my teeth anyway."

Isaac has been putting it off. The taste of tea lingers in his mouth. Isaac wasn't ready to wash it away yet, but, with Scott on the other line, he is now.

So, phones on speaker, they brush their teeth together. It's oddly intimate. Even when they lived together, they never did this. The honey drips from Isaac's tongue, down his throat, and settles slow in his chest.

When they're finished, Isaac brings his phone back to his ear, but he lets Scott be the one to break the comfortable silence.

"How are you feeling? Derek take good care of you?"

"Always," Isaac says, slight smile at the corner of his lips. Then, "I'm okay. A little off balance, but okay. Sorry if I freaked you out."

"I just want you to be okay," Scott says. Isaac's skin ripples with goosebumps and a tingle of something warm and heady.

"I am," Isaac says. His heart stays steady, but that doesn't mean anything. It's easy to warp the truth when you're lying to yourself.

"If you want, we can talk about it," Scott says, like an invitation. (Isaac ignores the unspoken, *I told you mine, you tell me yours.*)

"It was about my family," Isaac says. But he doesn't elaborate. He doesn't know why, but he can't unlock the words. They're chained in his throat, and, no matter how many times he opens and closes his mouth, he can't dislodge them.

"I figured," Scott says. But he doesn't push. He lets the quiet hang in the air, lets Isaac be the one to make the call. Maybe he knows that, if he asked, Isaac couldn't deny him. He's not sure he could deny Scott anything. That should scare Isaac, but it doesn't.

"What happened with the chimera?" Isaac asks because he has to. The chimeras are his responsibility too. So, better to get it over with. Get the business part of the phone call out of the way.

"He died," Scott says, straight to the point. Isaac doesn't miss the sadness in his voice. *"We brought his body to the animal clinic. Theo is waiting there in case someone comes to take it."*

Isaac's nerves jolt with the mention of Theo. Still, he just says, "Okay."

"That's not all," Scott says.

"Hm?" Isaac hums in question.

"Liam found the next chimera. Her name's Hayden. We're going to try to save her."

"I'll help," Isaac says. It's easy to offer. Because it's what's expected of him. Because it's what's right.

"Okay," Scott says. Then, *"Hey, I know it's not the day anymore, but I never got to say it so... happy birthday."*

Isaac heaves the most dramatic sigh.

"I know, I know," Scott says through soft laughter. *"I get why you didn't want to celebrate or make a big deal out of it but..."*

"But you're gonna disregard all of that and bring it up anyway?" Isaac asks. The words lack heat.

Scott, faux defensive, exclaims, *"It felt rude to not say it!"*

"Mhm, well, next time," Isaac says, "just be rude."

"I make no promises," Scott says, which Isaac knows is a denial. Scott's letting him down gently.

"Come on then. You know mine, so it's only fair: when's your birthday?" Isaac asks.

"October sixth."

"That's soon," Isaac says. "And, also, after mine."

"Two weeks, Iz. It's a two week difference," Scott says, sounding only a little bit like he's frowning. *"Wait, does that mean you're the oldest?"*

Isaac shrugs. "I don't know. I only know Stiles and Lydia's birthdays."

"I'll send you a list. I'll include birth times and everything," Scott says. *"What time were you born?"*

"What time was I-? Scott, I have no idea," Isaac laughs. He knows Scott's being ridiculous on purpose, but it still brings joy to the surface.

"Okay, well, that's fine. I'm sure Stiles could figure it out if he really wanted to," Scott says. He pitches his tone into something earnest and thoughtful.

"You're so right," Isaac says, exhaling with amusement.

"No, but, seriously, there's no way you're the oldest. That can't be true. It doesn't make any sense," Scott complains. He sounds genuinely put out by it.

"I'm not attached to my birthday. You can give me a new one. If you want," Isaac says. He doesn't ask why it doesn't make sense for him to be the oldest. He sort of wants to, feels curiosity nibbling at his joints, but he worries it might be some depressing reason. He's started smiling now and he doesn't want to lose this buzz.

"Uhhh... When were you turned?" Scott asks.

Isaac could probably calculate the exact date, but that would require thinking back to the day of his dad's death. He doesn't want to do that. So, he says, "I don't know. Sometime in February."

"Okay, everybody mark your calendars, Isaac's new birthday is 'sometime in February.'"

Isaac is supposed to laugh, but he doesn't. He hears movement. Isaac holds his phone further away from his ear. The sound isn't coming from Scott. It's downstairs, a rustling of sheets and a faint, nearly indiscernible whine.

"Scott, I gotta go," Isaac says, already sitting up.

"*Oh, okay.*" Disappointment. "*Yeah, it's getting late—*"

"No, it's – it's not that." (It's still early, not even close to their usual end-call time.) "It's Derek. I think he's having a nightmare. So."

"*Oh,*" Scott's voice lifts in a way that should probably be inappropriate. "*All right. Good luck with that and good night.*"

"Good night."

Isaac hangs up. He untangles his legs from his sheets and quickly pads down the stairs. He slows at the bottom, careful not to spook Derek any further.

For a brief eternity, Isaac stills. His eyes catch on the coffee table where *two* mugs rest. Derek never drinks the after-nightmare tea with Isaac. He never leaves dishes out. He never puts himself first. (*Like Scott*, Isaac's mind offers, being incredibly unhelpful.)

Isaac pulls his eyes away from the clues he missed. Derek is still asleep. He's making soft noises in the back of his throat, lips mouthing the shape of a name. He's damp with sweat and his brows are pulled tight together. Distress comes off him in waves, burning Isaac's nose and setting him to motion.

Isaac sits on the edge of the bed. He puts a hand between Derek's shoulder blades, right over the shape of the triskele. Isaac suppresses the urge to trace it with his thumb, and then thinks better of holding back. He lets his finger move, stroking his comfort and pressing his reassurance into Derek's skin.

"Derek," Isaac whispers.

This has happened before. Derek is better at hiding his nightmares than Isaac is, but he's not immune.

"Derek," Isaac says again, voice a little louder and hand a little firmer.

Derek gasps. He turns out of Isaac's touch and onto his back, chest

heaving and eyes startled and *open*. He's awake.

Isaac doesn't initiate contact right away. He waits and watches. He waits for Derek's heart to stop racing like it's a competition, he waits for his breaths to go a little more even, he waits for Derek's eyes to flick towards him.

Then, Isaac lays a hand over one of Derek's, and, "Hey."

"Go back to sleep, Isaac," Derek says, twitching like he's fighting the urge to roll over, to turn his back to Isaac, to shut him out.

"I wasn't asleep yet. It isn't that late. I'm not going anywhere," Isaac says, three choppy statements with conviction laced in the pauses in between.

Out of character, Derek doesn't fight him any further. He purses his lips together and goes quiet, staring just below Isaac's eyes.

"Talk to me?" Isaac asks, soft and a little pleading. He dips his eyes down a smidge, meeting Derek's head on.

Derek doesn't respond instantly. He hesitates, like he's thinking it over, like he's debating whether he actually has the ability to deflect Isaac's attention. (He doesn't. They don't have to talk – that's up to Derek – but Isaac's not going anywhere.)

In the end, Derek gives a small nod.

Isaac nods back. Then, "Come on, scooch."

Derek does. He sits up a little, edging over, more to one side of the bed instead of the middle. Isaac slides in next to him, only close enough that their arms brush with each restless movement. They don't look at each other. They stare straight ahead, and Isaac waits.

It takes almost five minutes for Derek to work up the courage to say, "It was about Laura."

"The nightmare?"

"The memory," Derek says. And Isaac hates himself a little. All the signs were there and he missed them. He forgot Derek read the book, too stuck in his own horror to save Derek from his.

Isaac hates himself a little, but he swallows it. He stops making things about himself, and asks, "Do you want to tell me about it?"

Derek hesitates.

“Braeden called me,” he says. “That’s what triggered the memory. I think she had to talk me down. I don’t know.”

Isaac’s grateful it was Braeden on the other line, grateful she could help when Isaac couldn’t, grateful Derek wasn’t alone.

“Okay,” Isaac says. He doesn’t want to ask too many questions. He doesn’t want to push Derek too far.

“It was Laura’s voice. It was the last time we spoke,” Derek says. He looks at Isaac. “It was the last time we spoke and I *forgot* it.”

Isaac doesn’t give shallow consolations. He just nods and rubs his bicep against Derek’s. Unexpectedly, Derek leans into the touch. Isaac fumbles, overthinks it for a moment, then drops his head to Derek’s shoulder. Isaac noses at bare skin, just the slightest movement.

Derek’s whole body relaxes. He sinks into the bed and into Isaac.

“When Laura came back to Beacon Hills without me, before Peter—” *murdered her and cut her in half* “—she found out. I don’t know how, but she found out about Kate.”

Isaac bites back a gasp. He goes tense, entire body locking up for half a second, then he relaxes. He breathes in deep, exhales. “And what did she say?”

“Nothing. She said... She said, when she got home, we were going to talk about Kate Argent,” Derek’s voice wobbles on the name, hands curling into fists. “That’s all she said.”

The memory changes everything.

“I thought no one knew,” Derek says. “I thought my last words to her were, ‘See you in a couple weeks.’ I – She died *hating* me.”

“You don’t know that,” Isaac whispers.

Derek moves, practically throwing Isaac’s head off his shoulder. His claws are digging into his palms now – Isaac can smell the blood.

“Don’t I? How would you feel if your younger brother’s stupid mistake cost you your entire family?” Derek’s almost growling.

“I don’t know, Derek,” Isaac says. He’s still leaning back against the

wall, doesn't get angry or upset. He stays level. "I don't have a younger brother. I don't know how I would feel... but I know it's really hard to hate family." Isaac swallows. As soft as he can, he adds, "You know that too."

It's dangerous, referencing Peter in such a way, but Derek doesn't burst or blow. Instead, he deflates. His fists unclench and he wipes the blood on his sweatpants. It makes Isaac grimace. Derek sits beside him again, whispers, "Sorry."

"Don't be," Isaac says.

This time, Derek rests his cheek on Isaac's shoulder. He's rubbing his hand over the bloodstain, making a mess of himself. "I just don't know what to do with this."

"Me neither," Isaac says. He thinks of his mom, his dad, Camden. It's all a big mess now, and they don't have the time to sort it out because there are still seven chimeras out there – one known and the rest strangers.

"Her voice," Derek says. "I had almost forgotten what it sounded like." He snuffles. "How fucked up is it that, as much as this revelation is eating me alive, I feel grateful to have heard her voice again?"

"About as fucked up as me, I guess," Isaac says. Derek makes a quiet, questioning noise, and Isaac explains with, "Cam didn't speak in my memory, but he stood in front of me and he was so..."

"Alive?" Derek asks.

Isaac nods.

"We make quite the pair, don't we?" Derek questions, a tickle of humor in his words.

Isaac nods again. Then, "Think we can go to sleep now?"

Derek's head leaves Isaac's shoulder and he transforms. Derek always shifts after a nightmare and Isaac always stays. He doesn't go back upstairs and he doesn't leave the bed. He gets comfy next to an actual wolf.

Isaac falls asleep surrounded by Derek's scent and idly stroking tufts of soft fur.

Isaac's never made the tea before, but, this morning, he makes his best attempt. He removes himself from the panting breaths of Derek's wolf, clears the old mugs from the table, and puts the kettle on the stove. He's certain that the whistle of steam has woken Derek, but the only indication is the ripple of fur fading into skin. Derek keeps his eyes closed and doesn't get out of bed.

Isaac appreciates Derek letting him do this. It's a ritual between them, just as much for Isaac's comfort as it is for Derek's.

Isaac brings Derek a mug of tea. He watches intently as Derek takes a first sip. His face scrunches up in mild disgust.

"How much honey did you put in this?" Derek asks. He tries another gulp, but he winces all the same.

"I'm sorry," Isaac says, soft and almost a whisper.

"Isaac, it's fine, I was just—"

"Not for the tea," Isaac interrupts. He's still standing at the side of the bed, the mug in his hand just on the wrong side of too hot. Isaac doesn't put it down and he doesn't sit. He says, "I'm sorry I didn't notice something was wrong and I'm sorry you've had to deal with me."

"What are you talking about?" Derek sits up, mug discarded on the floor beside his bed. Isaac's brain tells him it's a safety hazard, but he ignores the thought. "We take care of each other. That's what we do."

"Well, lately, it seems like a lot of you taking care of me and a lot of me doing nothing," Isaac mumbles. He feels a little childish, but it's true. He's been such a mess, over and over again. He's barely given Derek a break.

"It's not a competition," Derek says. And, "Yeah, I'll admit: you've had a hard week. So what? That's life. It's not about keeping score or being even. It's about what you need."

Isaac squeezes his mug. He wants to run a hand through his hair. He wants to scoff. Derek isn't *getting* it.

"And what about what you need? You needed me yesterday and I didn't notice," Isaac says. He can hear the self-loathing in the words,

but it doesn't change the truth.

Derek scratches his jaw. He looks like he's biting his tongue. "You didn't notice because I didn't want you to."

Isaac frowns. "Why not?"

"You didn't see yourself," Derek whispers. "You didn't see your face, you didn't see how Scott had to physically hold you up. You – Isaac, you were like a ghost."

Not like he'd seen a ghost – which, thinking about it, Isaac technically saw two – but like he *was* a ghost. And that's how Isaac felt. Like a version of himself had died. Like when Scott called his name, when he pulled Isaac out of the memory, a part of him was left behind.

Isaac takes a sip of the tea. Derek's right about the honey. It's a little bit vile in its sweetness. It coats his tongue and sticks to the roof of his mouth, cloying and too much and wrong.

"You're not a burden," Derek says, when he's decided Isaac has been quiet for too long. "That's not how this works, okay? Don't go doubting this."

Not when you're doubting everything else.

Isaac nods. "Can you–"

"I'll remake the tea," Derek says.

—

There's a map of telluric currents splayed across the library table. Isaac refuses to think of Chris Argent's office. Or Allison's hand joined with his over the blacklight. Or the cellar crashing down around them.

"We're back to telluric currents?" Stiles says, half question and half exasperation.

"If the Dread Doctors didn't like coming into Eichen House because of them, maybe we can use them to protect Hayden," Scott explains.

In the vast array of ridiculous schemes, this one doesn't sound too unreasonable.

"Okay, so, besides Eichen, where's the strongest convergence?" Stiles asks.

Besides the nemeton, “We’re standing on it,” Isaac says and doesn’t say.

Stiles stares at Scott and Isaac, impassive with eyebrows dropped low. Isaac wonders if he’s been taking lessons from Derek. “You wanna hide her in the high school? For how long?”

“If we have to,” Scott says, “all night.”

Stiles sighs, like, *fine*. He waves a hand for Scott to continue.

“Hayden’s sister is a deputy.” Scott says it more for Isaac than for Stiles, who would already know all of his dad’s employees. “Liam convinced Hayden not to say anything to her yet. She’s working a double tonight and she thinks Hayden’s staying at a friend’s.”

Stiles pulls a face, as if Scott’s words are completely irrelevant to him. “Okay, but it’s just a school though, y’know. It’s not exactly a fortress.”

“Lydia’s got an idea for that,” Scott whispers back, eyes a little wild. Isaac can’t tell if it’s adrenaline or exhilaration or something else entirely. “Remember how Valack quoted Tesla?”

Stiles looks at Isaac when he says, like an explanation, “If you want to find the secrets of the universe, think in terms of energy, frequency, and vibration.”

“Right,” Scott nods, “she thinks that he wasn’t saying that *just* to sound smart.” His eyebrows ripple. “She thinks maybe it was a clue.”

Stiles’ lips pull into a circle, eyes narrowing. “To do what?”

“Disrupt their frequency.”

“And how do we do that?” Isaac asks.

“Parrish,” the name feels a little weighted, but Isaac’s pretty sure that’s just in his head, “took three cell phone jammers from the station. He thinks they can broaden their range of frequency.” Scott shrugs, “It’s a long shot, but it’s the best we’ve got right now.”

“Well, it’s not our *worst* plan,” Isaac says, like a concession, like giving in.

“And what was our worst plan?” Stiles crosses his arms over his chest. “Enlighten me, would you?”

A dozen misguided plots flash through Isaac's mind. Surrogate sacrifices and ice baths, tranquilizer darts and bear traps, ketamine and flashing lights. Isaac knows his real answers, knows it's Scott's dead body in a morgue drawer, but he can't say that. So, instead, he lands on, "Robbing an armored car to steal Katashi's finger."

"Hey!" Scott interjects. "That worked!"

"Yeah, by pure luck!" Isaac argues. They shouldn't stay on this topic. It's one misstep away from Allison and Aiden and void. And yet, "None of it went as planned and I dislocated my shoulder."

Scott laughs, and, a touch sympathetic, he pats Isaac's right shoulder.

"If you really cared, you'd know it was the left." Isaac rolls his arm on instinct and he's sneering a little, but it's fake and Scott's well aware of that.

"See, I was thinking more when we tried to tell my dad about the supernatural and *you passed out*," Stiles says. He looks like he's fighting against a smile.

Isaac doesn't say anything about the chessboard and the lack of preparation there. It feels too close to something dangerous and off limits. He'll take the hit and let this one pass, instead grumbling, "Right because it's *my fault* I was poisoned."

"I'm glad you can finally admit that," Stiles says infuriatingly. And, even more so, he clutches a hand over his chest in a faux show of sentimentality, "You've really matured. I'm so proud."

"No, no! I've got it!" Scott says, interrupting Isaac's budding protests with eyes bright and victorious. Isaac and Stiles lose to their grins, smiles splitting open at the sight. "It's – It's the – When you were going to cut off Derek's arm!"

Stiles pretends to retch, body jolting forward and mouth puffing with air. He gags and the acting is so good Isaac almost believes it for a second. It's not a question when Stiles exclaims, "Why would you bring that up!"

"Shh!" a girl across the library hushes them harshly.

Stiles' face contorts in one of his signature expressions. It's familiar and silly and it makes Isaac laugh. It pours out of him, shining like light through a window, billowing like a breeze in spring. He feels

weightless for the first time in days.

Scott's voice is an anchor, guiding Isaac's feet back to the ground, "Okay, c'mon," he rolls up the map, "let's go before we get kicked out."

As they're exiting the library, Stiles reaches out to grab Isaac's wrist. The hold pulls him to a stop, it pushes him through the floor, it shoves him to the basement. It's a gentle grip, but it feels white hot and searing. It feels like a laceration.

Isaac yanks his arm back. Dark clouds blow in.

"Uh," Stiles says intelligently. "This is already what I was going to ask, but, after *that* reaction... Are you okay?"

Isaac holds both hands in front of his sternum, twisting them together in self-soothing motions of soft skin and light friction. He has no idea how much Stiles knows – about his disappearance to the cemetery, about his birthday, about his memory. He has no idea if Stiles has been told that Isaac is hanging by a thread, or if he just *knows*.

Isaac thinks he just knows. Even in the limited contact they've shared recently, Isaac has noticed it in Stiles too. It doesn't take much with them.

"Not really," Isaac says. Then, "You?"

Stiles repeats the sentiment, "Not really."

"And you don't want to talk about it either?" Isaac asks, though he's fairly certain he already knows the answer.

"Not even a little bit," Stiles says. He's barely making eye contact. His foot scuffs on the ground and he smells of guilt.

"Maybe that's exactly why we *should* be talking about it," Isaac says. Because they don't want to. Because they want to isolate and shut down and disappear. Because that's never worked before.

"Well," Stiles says, looking up at Isaac, "if we make it through this plan tonight, *then* we can talk."

The simple statement seems to raise the stakes and lower their odds. Isaac sort of wants to punch Stiles for it. He doesn't, but it's a near thing.

Isaac's ring daggers sit nestled in his pockets. The weight rests on his shoulders and, as always, he feels a little more whole with their presence.

As Isaac buckles his seatbelt, Derek snarks, "Do *not* stab yourself in the leg. I will never forgive you if you bleed out in my car."

Maybe it's because Isaac was already thinking about it earlier, but the words spark a memory. Of a bear trap in his leg and Allison's car and the teasing lilt of her voice.

"Yeah," Isaac breathes, almost laughs, finds himself surprised by the lack of pain there. "Been there, done that."

They're driving to the school, sun about to set and plan about to commence. Isaac isn't nervous. He doesn't have the usual pre-scheme jitters. He wants to think that means he's getting used to the routine of it all, but, honestly, that's just as sad as anything else. Really, Isaac just feels that this is secondary. Maybe it's pessimistic thinking, but this plan isn't meant to be the endgame and they all know it. It's preventive, it's to buy them another day, it's a necessary waste of their time.

"So, what happens if this doesn't work? If we can't keep the Dread Doctors out?" Derek asks.

And that's the other thing: the plan isn't even designed for success. They've anticipated their failure.

"Then we're going to try to catch one."

When Isaac and Derek arrive at the school, they find Scott standing outside waiting for them. He greets them with a quiet, "Hey," and a glance at Derek that lasts a fraction of a second too long. Scott's expression is one of concern and sympathy. Isaac recognizes it easily. He's had that look directed at him more times than he can count. Derek must recognize it too because he bristles under the stare. Isaac can practically see his hackles rising.

"The others are waiting inside," Scott says with an ushering kind of gesture.

Isaac ignores the feeling of Derek glaring at him and follows Scott into the school. Once they're inside, Scott stops to loop the chain lock over the door handles, securing the exit. They all know it will be useless against the Dread Doctors, but, if one of the other chimeras show up, it should keep them at bay.

Just like Scott said, the rest of the group is waiting for them (meaning: Parrish, Lydia, Malia, Liam, and another girl who Isaac assumes is Hayden). Kira's absence isn't lost on Isaac, but he doesn't question it. Isaac wasn't there that night at Eichen House, he only saw the end of it all, but he's heard enough to know that it was Kira's kitsune status that let the Dread Doctors in. If Scott doesn't trust Kira enough for this, then neither does Isaac.

"Okay," Scott says, hands clasping as they all come together. "We already set up the three cell phone jammers. The first is in Lydia's mom's office, the second is in the hallway by the trophy cases, and the third is in the locker room."

Maybe Derek and Isaac weren't as on time as they thought. Oops.

"We'll have four people keeping watch. Parrish will be outside, Malia will be at the front doors, and Derek and Isaac will be at the back entrance – where a break-in is most likely to happen," Scott says. They already know all of this, but the refresher is nice. "And the rest of us will be in the locker room protecting Hayden."

(The locker room isn't the central most point of the school, but the classrooms are locked up for the weekend, so it's their best option.)

"Everyone ready?" Scott asks.

He gets a chorus of affirmations in return. Scott's gaze falls on Isaac. Isaac nods and Scott mirrors the movement. Then, they disperse.

As they walk towards the back of the school, Isaac is all too aware of the grumpy energy radiating off of Derek. It comes in waves, and Isaac is certain that, if he looked, he would see those angry eyebrows of his.

"Oh, relax, would you?" Isaac cracks, fed up and heaving the words like a sigh. "I didn't tell Scott anything." Not that he even could have. Derek didn't give Isaac any of the details of the dream. "We were on the phone when I heard you having a nightmare. That's it."

Derek doesn't say anything until they're settled, stationed in front of back doors.

“Sorry,” he grumbles. “I know our shit stays between us. I *know* that. It’s just – Scott’s your alpha.”

“So?” Isaac asks, arms folding over his chest. He bites the inside of his cheek. “He’s your alpha too. Even if you don’t want to admit it.”

“It’s different,” Derek mutters, like Isaac should know that, like it’s obvious.

And maybe it is, maybe it’s obvious and maybe Derek’s right. It *is* different. Isaac doesn’t know how or why – personally, he blames it on the complicated history between Derek and Scott. But, then again, Isaac and Scott have their own twisted past too. So, maybe it isn’t that, maybe it’s something else.

Isaac’s not sure it really matters.

“Speaking of Scott,” Derek transitions terribly, “why didn’t you go with him?”

“Because that’s not where I was told to be,” Isaac says with a one armed shrug.

Derek levels him with an unimpressed stare, communicating, *like that’s ever stopped you before*.

Isaac huffs, but Derek doesn’t budge. He keeps looking at Isaac. There’s no trace of jealousy in his scent, nothing to clue him into the source of Derek’s intrigue. He just keeps looking at Isaac until, eventually, he caves.

“I haven’t told him about my mom yet.”

Derek’s expression shifts in a strange, contradicting mix of understanding and confusion. “Why not?”

Isaac has to really think about his answer. He doesn’t like keeping things from Scott. He tells him almost everything, and, for a while, it seemed to be a mutual truth. Isaac confided in Scott and Scott confided in Isaac.

Now, if he’s honest, Isaac can’t tell whether or not that’s changed.

“I don’t know,” he says, voice soft.

“Wouldn’t Scott be able to relate better than anyone?” Derek asks. “You know, since his dad left him and his mom?”

Isaac had sort of forgotten about that. He doesn't admit it, but he's pretty sure his silence gives him away.

After this plan is over, Isaac will talk to Scott. And Stiles. He'll talk to both of them.

—

They've been standing for a while and Isaac's legs are tired, but he doesn't sit and neither does Derek. They stay alert. Though, that doesn't mean they have to stay quiet.

"Hey, Derek?"

Derek doesn't answer verbally, but he does turn to look at him.

"What do you think our worst plan was?" Isaac asks.

Derek's eyebrows twist together. "What?"

"Scott, Stiles, and I were talking about it earlier," Isaac explains. He repeats, "What do you think our worst plan was?"

Derek looks down at his feet, contemplative. He's quiet for a moment, then he glances up again, "Do you want the funny answer or the real answer?"

"Both?" Isaac shrugs.

"The funny answer is you idiots throwing a blacklight party at the loft," Derek says. He's trying to be deadpan serious, but he's too smug to pull it off.

Isaac groans, head tipping back. He wants to argue that it doesn't really count as a *plan*, but he just complains, "Would you let that go? For the millionth time, that was the twins! I was just a guest!"

Derek laughs. "You should have stopped it. You let our home be defiled."

Isaac rolls his eyes. "Okay. And the real answer?"

Derek looks away and goes hushed again. Isaac wonders what he's thinking about. Laura, maybe. Mexico, more than likely. Kicking Isaac out, definitely.

Eventually, Derek decides on, "Turning three wounded teenagers into

werewolves.”

Isaac scoffs. “That is *such* a cop out. You *know* I don’t regret asking for the bite.”

Derek flinches a little, like he was expecting Isaac to accept his bullshit answer. Isaac’s not sure what would make him think that – his track record certainly doesn’t suggest backing down. Not where Derek is involved.

“How do you know *I* don’t regret it?” Derek asks. He folds his arms, chin tilted. He thinks he’s won.

He hasn’t.

Derek doesn’t regret offering the bite for the same reason Isaac doesn’t regret saying yes. It’s the unexpected feeling of family. Experiencing that again... it’s invaluable, it’s the greatest consolation prize.

Isaac doesn’t explain that. Only says, with a conviction to undermine Derek’s self-satisfaction, “I just know.”

Derek doesn’t mention Erica or Boyd or if they would regret it. Probably because he knows exactly what Isaac would say: Erica went down fighting and Boyd’s last words were an assurance that it was worth it.

Derek doesn’t mention them, but Isaac knows he’s thinking about Erica and Boyd. Because he is too.

“What’s the real answer?” Isaac asks again.

Derek sighs. “The real answer is from before.”

Derek doesn’t have to explain what ‘before’ means. It means before Isaac, before Scott, before fire.

Isaac doesn’t ask for specifics. It’s Kate or Paige, he knows. Neither is better than the other. Clarification isn’t going to ease the sadness, the kind that comes from caring so much for someone that their pain becomes your pain.

Isaac would put his money on Paige, but he doesn’t need to know, so he doesn’t ask.

“Well, this got depressing,” Isaac says in the type of tone he’s only picked up since he started spending time with Stiles.

“You asked,” Derek says, a little defensive. Like, *I tried to warn you*. Like, *this is your fault*. Like, *why can’t you just leave things be?*”

“It was funnier with Scott and Stiles,” Isaac mumbles – under his breath, but still meant to be heard. It’s enough to break the tension.

Derek exhales a gust of laughter. “So, you were all lying?”

“Well, yeah, obviously,” Isaac says. Then, “Stiles mentioned something about cutting off your arm?”

Derek tries to hide it, but there’s a sparkle of amusement in his eyes. “Stiles’ worst plan was drawing a ring of mountain ash around a building with two of my betas still inside.”

(*My betas*, Isaac’s heart beats to the rhythm of the words. His brain says, *three* – Jackson was inside too.)

“No, no,” Isaac says, shaking his head. “Stiles’ worst plan was stealing a prison transport van.”

“Using a baseball bat as his preferred weapon,” Derek counters.

Isaac fires back, “Dragging Scott out into the woods to find a dead body.”

Derek laughs. Isaac smiles at him. Happiness looks good on Derek. He has a face made for joy. It’s a tragedy that it’s so rare.

For a moment, the laughter fades and the conversation goes with it. Isaac doesn’t know what Derek is thinking about, but he’s thinking of Stiles. He thinks of evidence boards and red string, of intuition and gut feelings, of bravery and protectiveness. He thinks of red flares and the lingering scent of gasoline, of holding his breath and the sound of Scott’s screams, of ambulance resuscitations and a sliver of Stiles through heavy eyelids. He thinks of listening and focusing and taking seriously.

“And what’s his best plan?” Derek asks, almost as if he can read Isaac’s mind, tracking the change in thought.

With zero hesitation, “The vision.”

Derek smiles, but it quickly falls flat. “Where is Stiles, by the way?”

“He’s at the animal clinic with Theo,” Isaac says. “They’re waiting to see if they can catch whoever’s stealing the bodies.”

Derek's expression drops even further, eyebrows furrowing. "Are we sure that's a good idea?" he asks. "I mean, we still don't fully trust Theo and, if something goes wrong, Stiles won't be able to contact us with the cell phone jammers..."

Isaac hadn't thought of that.

This could be bad. This is fumbling around in the dark. This is disconnect, isolation, unknown. This is miscalculation and forgotten risk. This is bad. This is really, really bad.

"Isaac. Put the claws away," Derek says, voice even and firm.

Isaac hadn't realized the claws were out, but they're digging into his palms and drawing blood.

Shit.

Isaac looks at Derek and takes a deep breath.

His claws retract. Like Derek did last night, Isaac wipes the blood on his clothes. He likes this shirt, but the stains will come out – Melissa has taught Isaac a few tips and tricks.

"You stay here and keep watch," Derek says. "I'll go to the animal clinic."

Isaac still won't be able to know if they're okay, not until the night is through and the cell phone jammers are switched off, but he trusts Derek. Derek can handle Theo. He can take care of Stiles. Isaac trusts Derek enough to let him go.

As he walks towards the door, Isaac says, "Hey, Derek?"

Again, he doesn't respond verbally, but he looks over his shoulder.

"My best plan was moving back into the loft," Isaac says. (*Forgiveness*, he means.)

Derek grins. "Mine was saving you."

—

Isaac paces the hallway. He's getting nervous now that he's on his own. He's worried about Derek, Stiles, and the others within the school.

A chain rattles.

Isaac turns on his heel. He expects to see the back door jostling, expects to see the chain hitting against the handles. He expects to see the lock fall free, expects to see the Dread Doctors bursting through the doors.

He expects to see something, but, instead, there's nothing. The doors and chains are still. Nothing is seen and nothing enters. Nothing happens.

Still, the rattling continues.

Isaac turns his head. He doesn't know what he expects to see, but he has to look. He looks at the lockers. Nothing. He looks at the windows. Nothing. He looks down the hallway.

One of the classroom doors is open. Isaac swears that was shut before.

"Derek?" Nothing. "Scott?" Nothing.

Isaac moves forward. He stops just outside the doorway. His stomach tightens.

The jingling echoes again.

Isaac squares his shoulder. He pushes the door. He steps into the room.

Isaac feels like he's falling backwards. It's not a fluid movement. It's a shoved down sort of falling, stumbling and fighting. It's staggering to keep balance. It keeps going until Isaac hits the ground.

There's a wall against his back. There's a wall on his left. There's a wall on his right.

The chain clinks and clatters, and Isaac knows what this is. A shout of protest rips from his lips, but it's too late. The fourth wall closes above him. Isaac tries to be quick, tries to press up against it, but he meets with harsh resistance of chains bound tight.

It's a freezer.

His nails turn sharp and, before Isaac can even think about it, he's scratching at the door. He digs in, clawing and gouging, but it's no use. He hardly leaves a mark and his fingers start to bleed. Isaac keeps going anyway.

Isaac screams for help. He yells through sprouted fangs and chokes on spit in desperate pleas. He panics, shouting and crying, but it's no use. No one can hear him and he can barely breathe. Isaac keeps going anyway.

He squirms against the walls. He pounds fists against the lid and thrashes in all the nonexistent space. He fights, punching and kicking, but it's no use. The chains hold and he doesn't make a dent. Isaac keeps going anyway.

He scratches and screams and thrashes. He keeps going, but it's no use. Isaac is trapped.

He writhes. He knows he shouldn't. He knows movement only makes it worse, only makes him more aware of the tight space, but he can't help it. It's instinct. Isaac writhes and wriggles until the floor beneath him shifts.

Grains of sand scrape against Isaac's back.

"This is your fault."

It's not his father. It's someone else. Isaac has no memory of the voice. He shouldn't recognize it. He shouldn't know it, but he does.

"It's your fault."

The sand rises. It's filling the freezer. It's rushing rough against Isaac's skin. It's harsh and it's everywhere. It's filling every empty gap. It's taking over. It's infusing and choking and suppressing. It's closing in. It's under his fingernails, it's in his hair, it's piercing his throat. It's everywhere.

"It's your fault."

The space is growing smaller, it's sinking in as Isaac sinks under. He tries to scratch, but he can't get purchase through sand turning sharp nails blunt. He tries to scream, but he can't get volume through sand flooding his lungs. He tries to thrash, but he can't get power through sand dulling and slowing his limbs. Isaac tries to escape, but it's no use. He's being buried alive.

"It's your fault I left."

It's Isaac's mother. It's her voice. It's her.

“Isaac!”

The freezer falls away. The sand purges from his lungs. The voice turns into Scott's. Scott's hand intertwined with his, Scott's claws biting into skin, Scott's eyes glowing red, Scott's voice saying, “Isaac. Isaac. Isaac.”

Isaac comes to with a shock. He jerks away from Scott's piercing hold, gasping and coughing, violent and punishing. He's wet with sweat and tears and old and fresh blood. He pants and clears his throat and gags.

“Isaac,” Scott repeats. He says it like a prayer.

Isaac blinks up at him. “We've got to stop meeting like this.”

Scott laughs and Isaac wants to melt into the relief of the sound, but it fades fast. Laughter is replaced by the sharp scent of guilt. Scott's eyes flick away.

“What is it?” Isaac asks, pressing against the floor, struggling to sit up.

Scott's hand darts out to stabilize him. He holds Isaac tight, just shy of too much. He doesn't look at Isaac yet. He says, “It didn't work. The Dread Doctors took them.”

“Took who?” Isaac asks. And his own hand reaches out. He wraps his fingers around Scott's wrist, squeezing with the same pressure as Scott's grip on his shoulder.

Scott looks at him. Brown eyes are washed out, dull and dimmed like Isaac has never seen. Isaac gives a small nod, thumb dragging a circle on the soft underside of skin. He's probably smearing blood there, but Scott won't care.

“Hayden and Liam.” Scott traces his own circle, above Isaac's heart. “They're gone.”

Ouroboros

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 8

Word count: 9,793

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Isaac doesn't have much time to adjust. He wants to put the world on pause. He wants to catch his breath. He wants to rid that voice from his head and that sand from his skin. He wants to hesitate, but he doesn't. He follows Scott back into the hallway. There, they meet with Malia.

(Isaac's not sure where Lydia and Parrish disappeared to, but he doesn't ask. Just like Scott and Malia don't ask about Derek.)

"We can track them by scent," Scott says, strained with emotion and stress. Isaac feels it too, but it's different. Diluted. Watered down by the memory of the freezer, of that voice in his head and that sand on his skin.

Still, when Scott departs, Isaac follows. He follows him out of the school and into the parking lot. Here, they find Derek.

He's collapsed on the ground. His wrists are looped over his head. His eyes are open but unseeing. He's thrashing and convulsing. His body rears forward, fangs snarling, but he's pulled back to the ground by invisible chain. He's wincing and shaking, like he's in pain. Like he's being electrocuted.

Isaac comes to a stop, stuttering and abrupt. He falls to his knees at Derek's side, but he's afraid to touch him. He's afraid to make it worse. He's afraid of the fear in Derek's eyes.

Isaac looks up at the others. Malia is a few feet away, looking halfway to taking off again. Scott isn't much better. He's closer to Isaac, torn and conflicted. There's minute movement in his legs, a twitching of muscle. He wants to leave, Isaac knows. It's hurting him to stay.

"Scott. It's fine," Isaac says. And he means it. He understands how

Scott is feeling. They're on opposite sides of it now. Scott is scared for the wolf he bit while Isaac is scared for the wolf that bit him. It's different, but much the same. "Go."

Scott doesn't pause. They don't have the time. He runs off with Malia, leaving Isaac alone in the parking lot with Derek's writhing form. He's gritting his teeth now, back arching and sweat dripping from his brow.

Isaac takes a deep breath. He remembers Scott's claws digging into his hand. He remembers, *"pain makes you human."*

Isaac shuffles, reaching for one of Derek's arms, still poised over his head. He sinks his claws into Derek's wrist. Blood pools, but nothing happens. Derek stays lost to the hallucination.

It hadn't taken more than a pinprick to bring Isaac back, but, then again, he had Scott's voice aiding him through the transition. Scott's voice has always had an effect on Isaac, linked to his consciousness and tethered to his humanity.

Isaac's voice won't do that for Derek. He doesn't have to test it, he just knows. Isaac remembers the oni. He remembers holding Ethan's arm. He remembers, *"it'll trigger the healing."*

Isaac holds Derek's arm in both hands. Isaac swallows around the lump of sand in his throat. He drowns out the sound of Derek's pain, the way his teeth clash together, the growl building in his chest. Isaac holds his arm still. He whispers, "Forgive me for this."

Then, Isaac snaps the bone.

He doesn't look at Derek, but the answering howl is enough to know it worked. Derek tugs against Isaac's grip, but Isaac doesn't let him break free. Quickly, he resets the break, sliding the bone into place with a nauseating crunch.

Now, Isaac looks at Derek, but he still doesn't let go. He keeps his hold on Derek, leeching the pain out in big gulps.

Derek lets his head fall back against the pavement. His breathing comes heavy, but, otherwise, he's still. He stops twitching and writhing and his fangs retract. He doesn't try to pull free of Isaac's hold. He lets Isaac take his pain.

"You just had to go for the arm, didn't you?" Derek pants. He's staring

up at the sky, a touch of inappropriate laughter in the question.

"I didn't break it just for fun," Isaac says, but there's humor here too.

"I know," Derek says. His eyes drift to Isaac's, meeting in a clash of green and blue. "What happened?"

"The plan didn't work," Isaac says, though that much is obvious. "The Dread Doctors took Hayden and Liam."

"And I'm guessing Scott already went off looking for them?" Derek asks.

Isaac nods. "Yeah."

"And what about Stiles? Has anyone heard from him since the cell phone jammers got turned off?" Derek asks.

Isaac shrugs. "I don't know."

He pulls his phone out of his pocket. No word from Stiles. Isaac tries to call him.

"Hey. This is Stiles and you missed me. Leave a message."

Isaac turns to Derek. His mind is being pulled in a dozen different directions. There are three groups to be worried about now. Stiles and Theo, Scott and Malia, Liam and Hayden. (Isaac doesn't let himself think about Lydia and Parrish. He's sure they're fine.) There's just too much. Isaac needs the guidance. He needs someone to tell him what to do.

Luckily, Derek seems to know that. Or he gets impatient waiting for Isaac to speak up. Either way, it works in his favor.

"Okay," Derek says. He's sitting up now. His skin's a little pale still, but, again, too many worries to add another. "I'm better at tracking scent than you are." Isaac's not offended, it's true. "I'll go after Scott and Malia. You take the car and go to the animal clinic. Sound good?"

"Sounds good," Isaac confirms.

—

Beacon Hills Animal Clinic comes into view.

There's smoke in the air. The Jeep is turned upside down. Stiles is

sitting on the edge of the sidewalk. There's a splatter of blood on his face.

This is the part where Isaac should slow down, but he doesn't. He presses a little harder on the gas and speeds into the parking lot. He doesn't even turn the car off. He leaves the keys in the ignition and the door wide open as he runs towards the only person he's ever considered a best friend.

Stiles moves to his feet.

Sure, there's blood on his face, but it isn't the first time Isaac has seen Stiles like this. The day of the SAT comes to mind. Sure, the air smells like char and fire, but there's no gasoline. Not like the day of the motel. Sure, none of this looks great, but Stiles is standing and breathing and appearing unharmed. More than anything, he looks annoyed. For all intents and purposes, Isaac should be sighing in relief. And yet, he can't slow down.

Isaac runs towards Stiles, hands reaching out, gripping arms and trailing over skin. He's searching for injury. He's searching Stiles' face. His eyes are a little haunted, but it's the exhaustion that burns the brightest.

"Stiles," Isaac breathes.

"I'm fine," Stiles says, shrugging like he's trying to dislodge Isaac.

Isaac doesn't let him. Instead, he pulls Stiles into a hug. It's way too tight, arms circling and squeezing. Isaac's probably hurting Stiles – he winces when a hand lands on his shoulder – but he can't let go. Isaac doesn't know when Stiles got so far away. He doesn't know how it happened. He doesn't know when or how or why, but he knows that he *can't*. He can't let Stiles pull back.

"Isaac," Stiles grunts, repeats, "I'm fine."

There's a complaint in Stiles' tone, but his movements tell a different story. His hands find purchase in the back of Isaac's shirt, fabric clenched in his fists. He's reciprocating. He's pressing forward.

It's a messy hug. Stiles' chin digs into Isaac's shoulder, likely smearing him with blood. Though, if he's honest, Isaac doesn't care. He's got his own share of blood across his skin. It's concentrated around his hands, which are wrapped around Stiles and staining him all the same. Stiles might care about that later, but, for now, he presses forward and Isaac

presses back.

There haven't been many hugs between them, not enough to really build up a pattern, but, somehow, this one feels different. It's charged with intensity. It's not very long and it's not very coordinated, but it's important. Right now, Isaac doesn't really understand it all, but he doesn't think he has to.

"It's not even my blood," Stiles says. His breath tickles Isaac's neck and his words jostle his attention.

Isaac pulls back. He unhooks his arms and steps out of Stiles' embrace. Isaac looks past the flipped Jeep and the lingering smoke. He sees Theo. He's leaning into Derek's car. Isaac hears it when the engine cuts. He hears the keys clicking out of the ignition. He hears the door shut.

Theo turns around. There's blood streaked from his nose to his chin, but he smiles through it. Theo tosses him the car keys.

—

Working together, Isaac and Theo flip the Jeep. Roughed up as they might be, it's still an easy feat for two werewolves, and, in a couple of minutes, the car is turned back onto its wheels. They release the Jeep with a groan of metal and a crumble of the gravel drive.

"We should get you to the hospital," Theo says, directed at Stiles and not wasting any time. "You took in a lot of smoke."

Stiles shakes his head. He hasn't even attempted to wipe the blood off his face. There's even some on his lips. Scratchy and a little weak, he says, "I'm fine."

Isaac doesn't believe Stiles, but he knows pushing will only make matters worse. For all the right reasons, Stiles doesn't like the hospital. Losing his mom, getting possessed, electrocuting Isaac, piles of debt. So many bad things have happened there. For all the right reasons, Stiles doesn't like the hospital. But it's all the wrong reasons too. Lack of trust, inability to let others take care of him, fear of being seen as weak, control issues. In a tricky balance between valid and stubborn, Stiles doesn't like the hospital. It's a line that only he could walk.

Isaac knows that pushing will only tip Stiles over, he'll fall into one defense or the other. The right reasons and the wrong, the valid and the stubborn. Neither is easier to navigate, both are impossible to

sway.

If Stiles wants to say he's fine, if he wants to let the smoke settle in his lungs, there's no point trying to convince him otherwise. Not when failure is guaranteed and the reaction is unpredictable. Isaac isn't scared to push Stiles. It's what they do. Where others would let go, they push and they don't hold back. Isaac isn't scared of Stiles, but he is scared to lose him. He doesn't know how or when or why it happened, but there's a disconnect between them. Everything feels delicate and unsure, like it did before the talk in Scott's bedroom, before, *"because we're friends."*

As much as Isaac wants to push, wants to have that talk with Stiles, they haven't gotten through the plan yet. The Jeep is wrecked, they're both covered in blood, and Theo isn't exactly an ideal audience. It's not the right time. They still need to clean up the failure of the night.

So, for now, Isaac tables it.

"Suspect in 1-8-7 is in custody and en route to station." The Jeep's radio clicks on with a static crackle. *"Suspect's name is Yukimura, Kira."*

Curious, Isaac looks from the radio to Stiles. Beneath the crimson of drying blood, his eyes are lit with a quiet sort of panic. It's not frantic and it's not frenetic. It's almost frozen. It's shock.

"What's a 1-8-7?" Theo asks, staring at the back of Stiles' head.

There's a quiet moment. Stiles shifts, an ever-so-slight tip of his weight towards his heels. His eyes flick to Isaac.

"Homicide," Stiles says.

Isaac wants to protest. He wants to say that can't be right, but the words catch in his throat. He wants to be surprised, but he's not. He wants to have faith in Kira, but he doesn't.

"We should call Scott," Stiles says, but he makes no moves to draw his phone from his pocket. He's still looking at Isaac, gaze turning expectant.

"Uh, yeah, so, about that," Isaac rambles, "Scott's a little busy."

"Doing what?" Theo asks. He joins Stiles in watching Isaac. It's a little much for him right now.

“The, uh, the plan didn’t work,” Isaac says. He reaches a hand up to rub at the back of his neck, but stops when he remembers the blood. “The Dread Doctors took Liam and Hayden. Scott’s out looking for them with Derek and Malia.”

With an intensity and conviction that Isaac can’t quite place, Stiles says, “Scott’s going to want to know.”

Stiles is right. Scott’s going to find out eventually, one way or another. Isaac only hopes it will somehow be better coming from him. He pulls out his phone.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Scott,” Isaac says. “So, I’m with Stiles and Theo at the animal clinic. They were attacked by whatever’s taking the bodies, but they’re both fine. Um.” Isaac swallows. “Kira’s been arrested. Or, well, I don’t know if ‘arrested’ is the right term, but–” Stiles makes a waving gesture with his hand, ushering Isaac to get to the point. “We’ve just heard on the radio that Kira’s been taken in as a murder suspect.”

Stunned silence follows. At least, Isaac assumes it’s stunned. It could be outraged silence. Or confused silence. Or scared silence. Or–

“Shit.”

“Yeah,” Isaac says.

“I guess I’ll meet her at the station,” Scott says. Then, voice pulled taut, *“There’s, uh, there’s no scent. We tracked Liam and Hayden into the woods, but then the trail just stops. I don’t really – I don’t know what to do.”*

Scott sounds lost.

A year and a half ago, when they first met, this tone would’ve shocked Isaac. Even when Scott told him that he always had no idea what he was doing, Isaac didn’t believe him. Isaac still doesn’t believe that, but it’s different. He knows better now.

A year and a half later, Isaac has heard this tone before. He’s heard Scott confused and scared and vulnerable. He might not have heard every shade of Scott’s voice, but he’s heard enough.

“We’ll figure it out,” Isaac says. And, easy as anything, “We always do.”

“But—”

“We’ll figure it out,” Isaac repeats. “All right?”

“*All right*,” Scott says, but he still sounds just as lost.

A year and a half ago, this tone would’ve stuck in Isaac’s ears and toyed with his perception and rocked his standing. But, now, Isaac knows Scott.

“What do we do first?” Isaac prompts, giving direction by asking for it. “What’s the first step?”

“*Uh*,” Scott stammers. “*I’m going to the station to see what’s happening with Kira. The rest of you can go to my house and we’ll meet there after.*”

Scott sounds more certain. He’s not confident and he’s not steady, but he’s more certain than he was a minute ago. Isaac will take it.

“We’ll head there now,” Isaac says.

“*Okay. Thanks, Isaac.*”

Isaac doesn’t respond to that, but Scott hardly lets him. He ends the call as the last syllable hangs in the air. Isaac doesn’t mind. They don’t really do goodbyes. They do good nights and see you tomorrows and cut offs like this one.

When Isaac slips his phone back into his pocket, he finds that Stiles has looked away, but Theo hasn’t. He’s watching Isaac far too closely. It’s intentional. Like an examination.

“Where are we headed?” Theo asks, like he didn’t just get caught staring, like he feels no shame at all.

Isaac pushes past the weirdness, too strung out to care. He says, “The McCall house.”

—

The Jeep isn’t safe to drive, so they have to wait fifteen minutes for a tow truck to arrive. Then, once it’s on the hook and rolled out of the parking lot, Isaac drives himself, Stiles, and Theo to the McCall house. Isaac has never driven Stiles before, though he doesn’t make a fuss about it like Isaac expected him to. In fact, Stiles is uncharacteristically quiet in the passenger seat. He doesn’t even hum along to the radio.

Even after the wait for the tow truck, they still arrive at the McCall household before Derek and Malia. Isaac wonders if they're on foot.

Stiles commandeers the downstairs bathroom, so Isaac goes upstairs. There's a half-bath down the hall from Isaac's old bedroom, and that's where he goes to wash up. Isaac leaves the door cracked open an inch, too on edge from the hallucination for a closed door.

Isaac's almost glad there isn't a shower because he doesn't think he would be able to resist that temptation. He's comfortable at the McCall house, but, with a group of halfway strangers and danger lingering, it wouldn't be a good idea. Instead, Isaac washes his hands, scrubbing blood from his palms and underneath his nails.

Isaac's shirt is still caked with blood – both his own and Theo's. Isaac's no stranger to the stains, but, with an all night rescue mission approaching, he'd feel better in a clean shirt. So, Isaac walks the hallway towards Scott's bedroom.

He finds an open door and three people inside: Lydia, Mason, and Corey.

"Hey," Mason says, overly friendly despite the anxiety flooding his chemosignals. He throws a thumb over his shoulder, towards the bed, "This is Corey. He's the new chimera."

"Hi, Corey. We met briefly, at the hospital? I'm Isaac," he says, only slightly awkward.

Corey doesn't say anything, but his lips form a line of a smile and he gives a nod of recognition.

"He's reading the book," Lydia says. "If he was taken by the Dread Doctors, it might trigger his memory of their location and help us find Liam and Hayden."

It sounds like a long shot, but it's a good idea nonetheless.

"Well, don't let me interrupt. I just came to get a shirt," Isaac says, tugging on the hem of his and drawing their attention to the red stains.

"From Scott?" Lydia asks.

Isaac's brows furrow in his confusion. Then, sarcastic, "No. Melissa, actually."

Lydia rolls her eyes, but doesn't say anything more.

Isaac opens Scott's closet door. There's a shelf at the top, above the hanger bar, where Isaac knows Scott keeps his sweatshirts folded up. Isaac doesn't put any thought into it, just grabs the top sweatshirt from the closest pile. He tucks it under his arm and closes the door.

He turns to leave the room, sparing one last glance towards Corey.

Isaac makes it three steps down the hallway before he hears the telltale sound of clicking heels and Lydia says, "Isaac, wait."

He does. He stops and pivots, meeting Lydia dead on. She's changed outfits, no longer wearing the blue floral dress, but instead a white t-shirt and navy skirt. Isaac wonders when she had time to go home, wonders if she ever found Parrish. (He doesn't ask.)

"Did you hear about Kira?" she asks.

Isaac nods. "Yeah."

Lydia pitches her voice into a hushed whisper, "They found the body here. Downstairs in the kitchen. It was a chimera."

"Wait, what?"

Lydia knows Isaac heard her perfectly fine, so she doesn't repeat herself. Instead, she says, "It wasn't Kira."

Isaac doesn't ask Lydia how she knows. But, he does ask, "Then, do you know who did it?"

"No," Lydia says, smacking her lips together in a very quiet pop, leading into an inhale of breath. And, "*But* I think the fact that I *don't* know... means it was probably the Dread Doctors."

"Okay," Isaac says. Then, not unkindly, "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I have to tell someone," she says, hissing in near frustration.

"Okay," Isaac repeats. He's not sure what else to say. The Dread Doctors have killed every other chimera, so it should be obvious that Kira didn't do this. But, Lydia has a *feeling*, and she's right, she does have to tell someone. It's an important detail.

Lydia nods. "Go change."

Isaac does. He goes back to the half-bath, leaves the door cracked open again, and strips his soiled shirt. Despite its tarnished state, Isaac folds it neatly, setting it on the closed toilet lid. Then, he wiggles into Scott's hoodie. It fits a little weird, big on the shoulders and short in the sleeves, but it's clean and that's what matters. (Isaac tries to ignore the fact that it smells like Scott.)

It's only once the hoodie is on that Isaac realizes he stole one from the top of the pile. Meaning: it's probably one of Scott's favorites. And, looking down at the soft, dark green fabric, Isaac recognizes it quickly.

Isaac swallows his guilt and sends Scott a text: **I'm covered in blood so I'm borrowing a sweatshirt. Thanks in advance.**

Scott doesn't text back right away, but Isaac doesn't expect him to. He's likely at the station by now, which means he's with Kira. Isaac only hopes it's going as well as a situation like this can.

Isaac doesn't leave the bathroom yet. He's trying to figure out what to do with his discarded shirt. He doesn't want to toss the shirt completely, but he doesn't want to carry it around with him either. For the time being, Isaac brings it back downstairs with him, placing it on one of the end tables by the front door. He'll grab it when he leaves.

—

Derek and Malia show up not long after Isaac and Stiles finish cleaning up the blood staining their skin. (Stiles still has blood on the back of his pullover, but Isaac isn't going to tell him that. Isaac will let Stiles discover that on his own time. For now, it blends in fairly well against the dark blue of the shirt.)

Malia trudges inside, plopping down in one of the squishy armchairs with an exhausted huff of an exhale. Isaac finds it a little strange that she didn't choose to sit by Stiles (who's next to Isaac on the couch), but he figures maybe Stiles' new perimeter isn't limited to just Isaac.

Regardless, Derek trails in after her, coming a little slower and joining Isaac on the couch.

"What's that?" he asks, pulling the attention of the rest of the quiet room.

It takes Isaac a moment to realize Derek is talking to him, and another moment more to realize why. Isaac's been absentmindedly stroking his

thumb over the crescent wounds on the top of his left hand.

“Wounds from an alpha,” Isaac says. *Take longer to heal*, he doesn’t add.

“Wait, *that’s* how Scott brought you back from the hallucination? You get claw marks and I get a broken arm?” Derek asks, sounding more scandalized than is really necessary.

“I tried just using my claws, but it didn’t work,” Isaac defends himself.

“But did you have to go for the arm though, Isaac? That sounds a little pointed,” Stiles says, half mumbling.

Isaac kind of wants to punch him.

“That’s what I said,” Derek drags, shocked to be agreeing with Stiles for once.

“Okay, but, in Isaac’s defense,” Theo says from across the room, causing Isaac to perk up in interest, “he did have *Scott* bringing him back.”

“Yeah!” Isaac says, though his avid agreement brings some curious looks. He adds, “You know... alpha’s voice and everything?”

“Right,” Derek says. “And everything.”

Isaac frowns at that, but Derek doesn’t elaborate, merely stares back at Isaac with a blank expression that doesn’t twitch or shift.

“But, like, I’ve never seen an alpha’s voice more effective than Scott’s is for Isaac,” Stiles says.

Isaac’s not sure what that says about him, but it can’t be anything good.

“It worked on me too though,” Malia says, finally lifting her head from where it was tipped against the back of the chair. “I mean, it brought me back from being a coyote.”

“Yeah, but that was different. That was like a – an actual roar that *echoed* through the preserve,” Stiles says, arguing without his usual animation. His voice is soft. It doesn’t take long for Isaac to realize it’s tiredness that’s weighing him down. “Scott just has to, like, *whisper* Isaac’s name to bring him back.”

“Okay, but I wasn’t stuck as a coyote. Of course that would take more... oomph,” Isaac says, feeling a little too self conscious for his liking.

“Whatever you say, buddy,” Stiles answers. It’s patronizing and deserving of an elbow in the rib, but Isaac suppresses the urge and keeps his limbs to himself.

“Your voice brought me back once,” Isaac says, looking at Stiles. He’s not sure why it feels important to mention, doesn’t know why he needs to defend himself in the first place, but he does it anyway.

“That’s different,” Stiles says with zero hesitation.

“Why?” Isaac asks.

Stiles looks around the room, like he’s searching for support. When he gets none, he shrugs, “It just is.”

Isaac’s frown deepens.

—

At some point, Stiles falls asleep, arm pressed against Isaac’s in the subtle affection they often find themselves in. Isaac doesn’t move and he doesn’t wake him. Not right away, at least. Isaac’s not sure he’s ever seen Stiles fall asleep so easily, especially not in such a high stress context or surrounded by people – one of whom is *Theo Raeken*, by the way. It’s a testament to how thoroughly exhausted he must be, and, looking at Stiles at such close range, Isaac can see it. The omnipresent circles under his eyes have darkened into shadows, his skin is pale like he hasn’t seen the sun in weeks, and his body slumps, completely still in a way that Stiles almost never is.

It’s a worrisome sight, but there’s not much Isaac can do. Except be there, a constant weight against Stiles’ side and a protector in the vulnerability of sleep.

—

No one wants to use the kitchen. There’s a general smell of blood in the house, though that’s likely radiating from Isaac and Stiles more than the dead body found hours ago. The kitchen mostly smells like harsh disinfectants, but the island is lined with police tape and no one really *wants* to cook anyway. (Derek did try to use the coffee maker, but gave up after almost fifteen minutes of confusion.)

So, they send Lydia and Malia out to the nearest coffee shop. Isaac doesn't wake Stiles until they return. Malia comes in laden with drink trays and paper cups marked with the swirling logo of Beacon Coffee & Tea and Lydia follows after her, carrying two paper bags with the same symbol.

Isaac wakes Stiles with fingers drumming on the top of his head. He's not sure why he does it, maybe because it feels gentler than shaking him awake. Regardless, it works. Stiles comes out of sleep with a soft snuffle of sound and a confused, eyes still closed, "What are you doing?"

Isaac gives one last tap from each finger, a consecutive fluid motion. Then, says, "Waking you up. Come on, there's coffee."

That gets Stiles' attention. His eyes open and he stretches against the couch. He smacks his lips together in an almost cartoonish movement. "How long was I asleep?"

Isaac shrugs, "About an hour and a half."

"An hour and a half?" Stiles parrots, shock more than a little obvious.

Isaac wonders how long it's been since he's gotten that much continuous sleep. He wonders how long it's been since Stiles felt safe.

"Yeah, so get up before you start drooling on me."

—

The sun has long since risen by the time Scott comes home. He practically slams through the front door, pressing forward like a man on a mission.

"Hey, is Kira okay?" Stiles asks.

Scott ignores him. He's avoiding eye contact with each and every one of them. He's making towards the stairs.

"Scott?" Theo asks.

He gets ignored too.

"Scott," Isaac repeats, voice firm.

Scott stutters in his next step, but he doesn't slow down and he doesn't stop.

Isaac is powerless to do anything but follow. He's vaguely aware of the others bounding up the stairs behind him, but his focus is on Scott and the retreating form of the back of his jacket.

Scott disappears into his bedroom. Isaac can hear him speaking, but the words don't register. He rushes down the hallway, turns into Scott's room, and what he sees knocks the wind right out of him.

Scott's claws are stabbed into the back of Corey's neck.

Isaac promptly slams on his brakes, stopping in the doorway and fumbling back a step. He collides with the person behind him, feels a steadying hand on his hip, but it's all background noise.

Scott's claws are stabbed into the back of Corey's neck and it feels like betrayal.

Isaac has only experienced this twice before. He has no recollection of the first, but the second... Isaac remembers Peter's claws in the back of his neck. He remembers the discomfort, remembers feeling a tug at his brain, remembers being touched where no human should be touched. He remembers the invasion. He remembers something wrongly intimate. He remembers feeling violated.

Scott's claws are stabbed into the back of Corey's neck and it goes against everything Isaac knows.

This is everything Scott isn't. Scott is compassion and kindness and empathy. Scott is steady morals and graceful alpha power. This is force and harm and risk. This is unprecedented. This is a line crossed and disregarded. This is *wrong*.

Scott's claws are stabbed into the back of Corey's neck and there's nothing Isaac can do.

"Don't get too close," Lydia says.

Isaac wouldn't dare. If anything, he wants to flee. He wants to run from this and pretend it never happened. He doesn't, but he strokes his thumb over the claw marks on his hand, pressing enough that they sting a little.

"What is he doing?" Theo asks.

"Tapping into Corey's memories," Lydia says. Isaac doesn't look at her – his eyes are locked on Scott and Corey, can't bring himself to look

away – but he can hear her disapproval. “It’s usually something only alphas can do.”

“Is it as dangerous as it looks?” Theo asks.

“More,” Derek says. His voice is so close Isaac can almost feel it. Derek’s staying nearby, within a range of comfort. He’s probably thinking of Peter too.

“Does anyone know if it’s working?” Mason asks.

There’s no way of knowing. All they can do is stand and watch. All they can do is wait.

Simultaneously, Isaac’s thoughts feel both frozen empty and whirlwind fast. He feels stuck in this moment, in the sight before him, in the first shock of betrayal. But he also feels a million miles away, in the aftermath, in the reconciliation of this moment and everything before. He can’t quite wrap his head around it.

Isaac remembers the hospital. He remembers Scott holding Corey’s hand and taking his pain until he almost passed out or worse. Isaac remembers, but it doesn’t change the present. Scott’s claws are still stabbed in the back of Corey’s neck. Isaac doesn’t understand how these two acts can co-exist. He doesn’t understand.

Scott has always been so good. He’s had his moments, just like everyone, but none like this. This is something dark.

All Isaac can think is: *wrong, wrong, wrong.*

Eventually, Scott’s claws retract and he comes out of Corey’s mind with a gasp of breath. They disconnect and Scott falls backward, right into Isaac and Derek, who catch him without thinking. Scott leans into them, stumbling to press against the closest piece of furniture.

Scott pants, “Is he okay?”

For a moment, Isaac thinks it’s regret. For a moment, Isaac thinks this was just a fluke, a mistake, a lapse in conscience.

“What the hell did you do to me?” Corey halfway shouts. He’s distressed and confused, but at least he’s not crying. Isaac cried when Peter’s claws left his neck.

Scott hears Corey’s voice and sees him standing and his compassion

falls away. He whispers, “You’ll be all right.”

“There’s blood,” Corey says. He’s freaked out and scared and he has every reason to be.

“You’ll heal,” Scott bites.

Isaac hardly recognizes him. He tastes bile. His voice comes like a plea without his consent, “Scott—”

“He’ll be fine!” Scott yells. He’s all out of patience and all out of kindness. And it’s all Isaac can do not to flinch. Even still, he takes a step back.

The room is crowded, nearly impossible to move without running into someone, and, this time, Isaac bumps into Stiles. Stiles presses the line of his arm against the line of Isaac’s, just like on the couch downstairs. It’s enough to stop Isaac’s retreat.

“Listen,” Scott says. He has their attention, but he’s losing their respect. (And maybe that’s not fair, maybe Scott should be allowed these human moments, but Isaac is having a hard time finding any sympathy.) “I think it worked. I saw something.” He’s picked up a notebook now, scribbling messily. “There were tunnels, pipes along the walls... these huge blue pipes at the entrance, two on both sides.”

“Wait a second,” Stiles says, staring at the drawing. “I know this. I’ve seen this before. That’s one of the tunnels I used to skateboard in.” He looks up at Scott. “Remember my dad caught me one time and told me to never go back?”

Lydia struts over, getting a look at the sketch. She doesn’t meet Scott’s eye and it’s purposeful, Isaac knows. “It’s the water treatment plant.”

“That’s where they are,” Scott says. “That’s where we’ll find Liam and Hayden.”

—

Scott descends the stairs just as quickly as he stormed up. He ignores them the same way too.

“Scott,” Stiles calls after him. “Scott, slow down. Just think for a second, okay? Mason shouldn’t be going.”

“Liam’s my best friend. I’m going,” Mason says, brushing past Stiles.

He's not rough about it, but he falls in line next to Scott and Malia and doesn't budge.

"Oh, did you suddenly get super-wolf powers? I wasn't aware of that development," Stiles snarks, adamant in his disapproval.

"Well, if you're not going, I could use the help," Scott says. He's talking to Stiles, but his eyes flit to Isaac. Isaac lets them meet, but he doesn't give. Maybe it's unfair or petty or an overreaction, maybe it's because it's *Liam* they're trying to save, but Isaac has no intention of going with them. Not after what Scott just did.

"No, I'm coming, just as soon as I talk to my dad. They're moving the body and he wants to make sure that, this time, no one steals it," Stiles says.

"How's he going to do that?" Malia asks.

"I don't know, but whoever took the last one was strong enough to flip my Jeep," Stiles says, imbedding his voice with a tone of urgency, like he's trying to get Scott to see that this is important too.

Scott doesn't argue that fact, but he obviously doesn't want to wait any longer than he has to.

"We can bring Theo," Malia suggests, pointing at the boy in question.

Scott turns to Theo, shrugging as if to say, *it's up to you*.

"Maybe I better stay here. You know, in case the Doctors decide to make a house call for Corey," Theo says.

Distantly, Isaac does find it strange that Theo, who has always offered his help without hesitation, is drawing back now. Isaac wonders if it's because of the stunt Scott pulled upstairs or something else entirely.

"Scott," Lydia says. She keeps her voice level, "Stiles is right. We need to slow down and think."

"I am thinking," Scott argues, eyes flicking around the group, "about how Liam and Hayden could already be dead."

"You could've hurt him, Scott," Lydia says. "Really hurt him."

Scott's mouth parts open and his head shakes. He's not ignoring them, he just doesn't care. Or, at least, he doesn't care *enough*. Not as much as he cares about Liam.

"I have to find Liam," Scott says.

And it's not that Isaac isn't worried about Liam and Hayden. Because he is. He really is. But, as Scott has just proved, he's willing to do just about anything to save Liam. And that makes it difficult to imagine an outcome where they don't make it out of this alive.

(Isaac should be more understanding. He's lost packmates – *littermates* – before. But.)

"I'll go with you," Derek says, sounding like he'd rather do anything else. And, when Isaac turns to face him, his expression is much the same. He looks apologetic, but Isaac doesn't want him to be sorry. A small and quiet part of Isaac is glad Derek's going with them. Even if Isaac is a little mad right now, he doesn't want anything to happen to Scott. And he knows that Derek is well aware of that.

Isaac tries to communicate that acceptance in a nod. He's pretty sure it's too complicated to convey in such a subtle movement, but Derek seems to get it. His expression softens and he steps to the other side of the room.

Then, the four of them turn to leave.

"Text me," Stiles says, stepping towards Malia and keeping her back. "For anything."

"I got it," Malia says.

"Anything at all. Okay?" Stiles calls after, but Malia doesn't answer. She trails out after the others and the screen door closes with a bang.

—

Stiles is the next to try to leave the McCall house.

"You're not going alone," Isaac says. Like hell he's letting Stiles go to the hospital by himself when they know that whatever's taking the bodies will be headed there too.

Stiles huffs. "Isaac—"

"You don't have a car and there's no way Derek would want you driving his," Isaac says. "I'm coming with you."

Stiles might want to argue, but Isaac has the keys. It'd be a futile effort and they both know it. *Checkmate.*

“All right, fine, you can drive me,” he says, as if Isaac is going to wait in the car. That’s not going to happen, but they’ll cross that bridge when they get there. For now, they march to Derek’s car and peel out of the driveway.

They make it a good three miles down the road before Stiles cracks in the silence. “Why didn’t you go with Scott?”

Isaac groans, muttering, “Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

It’s a rhetorical question, but Stiles answers anyway. “You’re kind of always with Scott.”

“No, *you’re* kind of always with Scott,” Isaac argues, very aware he sounds like a petulant child.

“Yeah, wow, very good defense. I’ll never recover from such a blow—” Stiles’ sarcasm cuts off as Isaac throws out a hand to smack him in the shoulder. “Whoa! Ow! Hey! Both hands on the wheel!”

Isaac does as told, but doesn’t satisfy the outburst with a verbal response.

“Seriously though,” Stiles says, “I don’t know why Derek would consider *you* the more reliable driver. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you drive before.”

“I seem to recall something about seventeen tickets,” Isaac says, keeping his eyes on the road.

Stiles makes a sound like, *pshh*.

—

“You tell me, man. You’re the mechanic. If the gas tank didn’t rupture and nothing electrical was burned, then how did the fire start?” Stiles rants into his phone, all the while fast-walking through the hospital with Isaac at his side. “‘Spontaneously combusted’? That’s your answer? Are you kidding?”

Sheriff Stilinski approaches. He stops in front of Stiles and Isaac, taking the phone from his son and putting a stop to his tirade. Stiles makes an affronted noise as Stilinski hangs up for him.

“What are you doing here?” the sheriff asks.

“Dad, you gotta leave the body, okay?” Stiles says, quickly switching

gears. “Leave it, and let whoever wants to take it just take it. Trust me.”

“I’m doing my job, Stiles,” Stilinski says, turning on his heel and trying to close the conversation.

Stiles sags in frustration, but he doesn’t leave it there. Honestly, Stilinski should know better at this point. Stiles is nothing if not persistent.

“Yeah, you’ve been *real* busy,” Stiles says, following after his dad. “Arresting people you know are innocent.”

It’s a low blow and, once again, Isaac finds himself caught off guard by the fearlessness with which Stiles speaks to his father.

“Go home,” Stilinski says, tone stern and leaving no room for argument. “Now.”

Stiles finds room. (Worming – it’s one of his skills.) Stilinski enters the elevator. Stiles follows after him and Isaac after Stiles.

“This is not up for debate,” Stilinski says.

“Well, then I’m not leaving,” Stiles says as the elevator doors slide closed. Which means, Isaac isn’t leaving either.

It’s no worse than waiting at the McCall house.

“You know,” Stilinski says, forcing casual. “Clarke mentioned something about, uh,” he looks over at Stiles, “key cards for the library.”

There’s a hitch in Stiles’ breath, so subtle only a werewolf would notice.

“Do you all have after-hours access?” Stilinski asks. And Isaac knows there’s something he’s missing here, something that Stiles and Stilinski are in on, something that warrants the sudden heavy weight in a conversation about library cards.

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “Yeah, we do. I’d show you mine, but I lost it a couple weeks ago.”

Stiles’ heart skips and jumps, so quiet only a werewolf would hear. And yet, Isaac’s pretty sure Stilinski knows Stiles is lying without having the supernatural advantage. Still, he doesn’t say anything, and

the rest of the elevator ride passes in tense silence.

There are deputies posted all around the morgue. Isaac suppresses the dread locked in his bones, but he can't help but think, *this is going to be messy*.

Despite the impending doom, Isaac and Stiles find a place to sit and wait. Isaac tries to ignore the uncomfortable plastic of the chair.

Whatever's coming to take the bodies likely won't come till after dark, which means they've got time to kill. Which means, "Are we finally going to have that talk?"

Stiles looks at Isaac. For a second, he looks scared, but it's quickly masked with something blank, something closer to annoyance. "Is it really the time or place for that?"

"Why not?" Isaac shrugs. Scott and the others are on their way to finding Liam and Hayden right now, and the danger at the hospital is inevitable but not imminent. If you asked Isaac, this is sort of the perfect time.

Stiles sighs. Then, "You first."

Isaac saw that coming a mile away, but, if vulnerability is what they need to close the gap between them, he's more than willing to comply. So, Isaac says, "Okay."

It takes him a moment to really get into it, mostly because he doesn't know where to begin. But, eventually, "I guess it started the day before my birthday, when you guys went to Eichen House without me. September 21st." Isaac clears his throat. "It was the anniversary of Cam's death."

Isaac feels more than hears Stiles' exhaled breath of, "*Fuck*."

"I didn't mean to disappear that day, but I... I ended up at my old house and at the cemetery," Isaac says. "That's where I ran into Parrish. Turns out, he knew Camden in the military."

Stiles nods to show he's listening, but he doesn't say anything yet.

"He died the day before my twelfth birthday." Isaac's voice is pulled taut. "That's why – why I don't tell people about my birthday. It's...

not a very happy day for me.”

“No, yeah, totally, I – obviously, I didn’t know any of that,” Stiles says. “I don’t want to say ‘I’m sorry’ because I know it’s not always a great thing to hear but...”

“It’s okay,” Isaac says. “No one knew.” Then, “Well, okay, Derek and Lydia knew about my birthday, but I swore them to secrecy.”

“Of course *Lydia* knew,” Stiles says, bringing some levity to the conversation.

Isaac nods. He runs a hand through his hair. *And now for the hard part.*

“That’s not all.”

“Okay,” Stiles says.

“When we read the book, I didn’t remember anything about the Dread Doctors,” Isaac says. “I remembered something about my mom.”

“Oh,” Stiles says. “Me too.”

But he doesn’t elaborate or interrupt more than that. Isaac’s grateful for it. If he stops now, he’s not sure he’ll ever be able to start again.

“The memory was triggered when Scott, Theo, and I were going down into the school basement,” Isaac says. He pointedly doesn’t look at Stiles now, can’t bear to see the recognition there. “My dad was dragging me down the stairs and yelling that it was my fault. And–”

Isaac wheezes. Stiles’ hand is on his back in an instant, stroking slow circles and patting gently. He doesn’t stop until Isaac can breathe, but, even then, he doesn’t pull his hand away. He lets it rest between Isaac’s shoulder blades, anchoring him in place.

“Nothing really happened,” Isaac says, the same half-lie he told Derek. “Camden broke the lock on the basement door and stopped it.”

“Wait, I thought... I thought...” Stiles trails off, like he can’t figure out how to phrase this sensitively. “Camden was there?”

“It was my sixth birthday,” Isaac says in lieu of a proper response.

“Jesus, you just can’t catch a break, can you? Have you ever had a good birthday?” Stiles asks. Isaac hears the humor there, but also the genuine concern.

Isaac shrugs. "Cam dressed up as a superhero once."

"Cool," Stiles says and his smile is so real. His hand circles again, but he doesn't press Isaac to continue. He stays patient and waits.

"Um," Isaac says. "It never happened again. Not until after Camden died."

"Okay," Stiles says, like he knows Isaac needs to say it, even if the justification doesn't make it any better. And also like he knows Isaac isn't finished.

"My dad kept saying it was my fault," Isaac says, backtracking only slightly. "He blamed me when my mom left."

"Your—?"

"My mom," Isaac says. "She didn't die. She left us."

—

Isaac doesn't know how Stiles makes it easy. Maybe it's the fact that he lost his mom too, that he can place himself in Isaac's shoes better than most, that he can imagine the shock of grief turning twisted. Isaac doesn't know how, but Stiles makes it so easy. He reacts in all the right places in all the right ways. And, when Isaac is finished, Stiles just says, "I really wasn't expecting that."

"Better or worse than what you thought?" Isaac asks, pulling on the too-short sleeves of Scott's hoodie.

"Oh, worse, without a doubt," Stiles says, but he's laughing a little. "It's always worse with you."

Isaac chuckles. "Right." He snuffles. "Okay, your turn."

Stiles freezes. His hand falls from Isaac's back and his eyes drop with it, like he can escape this by simply ignoring it. And it's a little frustrating, considering Isaac just bared his soul, but then he sees the way Stiles caves inward. His knee starts to jump and his thumbnail goes to his mouth and his wheels turn so fast Isaac smells smoke.

"Hey," Isaac says, trying to sound gentle. "Come on, you can tell me. When have I ever judged you?"

Stiles' eyes dart to the left, but he looks away just as fast. He huffs a sort of humorless laugh and it makes Isaac's blood go cold. "Literally

all the time.”

“Okay, yeah, maybe, but... I won’t,” Isaac says. “Right now, I promise: no judgment.”

“You can’t say that,” Stiles says. “You don’t – You don’t know what I did.”

“Then tell me,” Isaac says. “Give me a chance to prove it.”

For a long time, Stiles goes silent. Isaac thinks he’s lost him, thinks, *this is it*. But then, Stiles reaches into his pocket and pulls out his library key card. He flicks it against his hand, and says, “My thing started the day before the Eichen House plan.”

Isaac tries not to think about the poor timing, like how maybe he would’ve noticed Stiles was falling apart if he hadn’t been falling apart too.

“Malia and I were at the library, looking through the bestiary for information about the chimeras. I guess I fell asleep because when I woke up it was dark and Malia had left,” Stiles says. His hands are twisting together in his lap. “I tried to leave, but the Jeep wouldn’t start. I got out to take a look at the engine and... that’s when he attacked me.”

“Who?”

“Donovan,” Stiles says, like he has to force the name from between his teeth. “He was a chimera too. A, uh, a wendigo.”

Stiles keeps his eyes trained dead ahead, and Isaac... Isaac just listens.

“I tried to run, but he was – he was pretty damn determined. He followed me back into the library. And I just... I just kept thinking: I can’t let him kill me and I can’t let him kill my dad.” Stiles’ grip on the key card goes white knuckled. “There was this scaffolding and I – I don’t know what I thought I was going to do once I got to the top, but I just started climbing it. Except then he started trying to drag me down.”

There’s a sinking feeling in Isaac’s stomach, but he disregards it, doesn’t let his mind stray. He focuses on Stiles and the words being spoken.

“There was this pin. There was *one little metal pin* attached to the

scaffolding. And... I pulled it,” Stiles says, like, *end of story*. “I don’t know what I was thinking then either. But I pulled the pin. And then all these metal braces started falling and... one of them just went right through him.”

Isaac swallows on a shocked gasp.

“I didn’t know what to do. I dialed 911 and ran out to the Jeep and... and I was going to leave. I was going to run, but then I just couldn’t and.” Stiles’ hands are shaking now. He’s staring down at them. Isaac wonders if he’s counting. “On the radio, they – they said it was a prank call. I went back inside, but the body was gone. Even the blood. It was all gone and I... I didn’t know what to do.” Stiles finally looks at Isaac. “So, I didn’t do anything.”

“It was self defense,” is the first thing Isaac says. He needs to say it, though he’s sure Stiles doesn’t want to hear it.

Stiles shakes his head, and Isaac knows what this is. It’s the classic ‘you don’t understand’ move. The sentiment is mirrored in, “I felt *relieved*,” Isaac. I felt like – like I wanted him dead, and then he was, and I was happy about it.”

“And how do you feel now?” Isaac asks. “Outside of the adrenaline and the survival, what do you feel?”

Stiles doesn’t answer.

“Look, I... I can’t tell you how to feel,” Isaac says. “As much as I want to, I can’t. But I *know* you, Stiles. You’re not a murderer.”

“I *killed* him,” Stiles says.

“He was going to kill you,” Isaac says. “It’s self defense.”

“I keep washing my hands, but it’s like the blood’s still there. It won’t. It won’t go away,” Stiles says, a whisper of something desperate. “I thought – I thought Aiden would be the last person I ever killed.”

“You didn’t–”

“I did,” Stiles snaps. “It was my body and my inability to close the fucking door in my head.”

“Okay,” Isaac says. “You killed Aiden. Does hearing that make you feel any better?”

“No,” Stiles says, but his volume has dropped again. “I just,” he tips his head back, “I want everyone to stop lying to me. I know what I did and you all know it too.”

“Give me your hand,” Isaac says.

Stiles hesitates. Isaac doesn’t ask again and he doesn’t push. He waits until Stiles is ready, until his hand is outstretched. Then, Isaac guides Stiles’ palm over his chest.

“Isaac, this is—”

“Shush.” Slowly, “You’re not a murderer.” And, “It was self defense.”

Isaac lets go and Stiles pull his hand back, mumbling, “Okay, so your heart rate didn’t change, whatever.”

“See,” Isaac says. “I can’t tell you how to feel. No matter what I say, it’s not going to make a difference.”

“What’s your point?” Stiles asks. He sounds like he’s had the fight knocked out of him.

“I know you, Stiles. I know how hard you are on yourself and I know how stubborn you are. No one is going to be able to convince you either way. And I know you know that too,” Isaac says. “So, why did you tell me?”

“Wh – Because you *asked* me,” Stiles says, like Isaac is being purposefully obtuse.

“Bullshit,” Isaac claims. “You could’ve easily squirmed out of this conversation and you know I would’ve let you.” He repeats, “Why did you really tell me?”

“Because I couldn’t take it anymore,” Stiles says. “Because this secret’s eating me up inside and I’m pretty sure it’s going to kill me.” And, “Because we’re friends.”

“Okay. Does anyone else know?” Isaac asks, very kindly not making a big deal out of that last part.

Stiles shakes his head, then appears to think better of it. “Theo does. I guess he was there at the library that night. And... And my dad seems to know something, you heard him in the elevator.”

“And what about Scott?” Isaac asks. “Are you going to tell him?”

Stiles looks at Isaac. The fear is back in his eyes now. “I’ll lose him if I do.”

Isaac doesn’t know if Stiles is right. On the one hand, Isaac knows how Scott feels about killing the people they’re trying to save. It’s a zero tolerance policy of sorts. But, on the other hand, Isaac knows how Scott feels about Stiles. He would burn the world down if it meant keeping Stiles safe. Isaac doesn’t know which force is greater – the kind of morals strong enough to cross over mountain ash or the kind of love strong enough to fight a tsunami and win. Isaac doesn’t know.

Isaac can’t tell Stiles how Scott would feel, but he can tell him, “Well. You still got me.”

Stiles has tears in his eyes and shock rich in his chemosignals, but then the fire suppression system is enacted and the emotions are interrupted. Isaac and Stiles are on their feet in an instant, rushing towards the morgue with the chorus of a fight breaking out as their accompaniment.

They burst through the double doors. But they’re too late. The body is already gone.

“Dad?” Stiles immediately starts yelling, running back into the hallway. “Dad!”

It doesn’t make any sense. The thief shouldn’t have had enough time to get past the deputies, into the morgue, and back out with the body. Not without at least being *seen* by Isaac and Stiles. It doesn’t make any sense.

Until it does.

There’s a glint of metal on the floor. Isaac leans down to pick it up. It’s a name tag. The thief didn’t have to get past the cavalry because the thief was part of the cavalry.

Stiles and his dad burst into the morgue. Isaac pockets the evidence.

—

Back in Derek’s car, Isaac shows Stiles the name tag. “I don’t know why I took it, I guess I wanted to protect him—”

“No, it’s good. If my dad found out now...” Stiles shakes his head. “But we have to tell Lydia. She knows him best. He told her

everything he could about his supernatural experience. If anyone can help him, it's Lydia."

"Okay," Isaac says, feeling marginally better about the impulse decision. "So, where to?"

"My house," Stiles says, "I'll tell her to meet us there."

And so, that's what they do. Isaac drives them to the Stilinski household. Once there, they don't have to wait long for Lydia to arrive. The three of them stand in Stiles' bedroom. There's a momentary stalemate.

"What did you have to tell me?" Lydia breaks. She looks tired, but they all are.

Stiles looks to Isaac, tipping his head in a sign of permission. Isaac reaches into his pocket. He pulls out the badge, the shining metal of *Parrish*, and offers it to Lydia.

"It's him," Stiles says. "He's the one taking the bodies."

"And I think I know where he's taking them." Lydia turns on an exhale, facing the open door of Stiles' bedroom, like she can't look at them when she says, "The nemeton."

—

Isaac goes back to the loft. He kind of hopes Derek won't be back yet, but, of course, he is. He stands from the couch when the loft door opens, but drops down again when he sees it's only Isaac.

"Hey," Isaac says. "Did you find them?"

"No, but," Derek rubs his hands against his thighs, "Theo did."

"Theo?" Isaac clarifies, face scrunching in confusion.

"Yeah. I don't know how, he said it was a lucky guess. I'm just glad they're okay and I don't have to keep running around those tunnels," Derek says. Then, "Did you catch the person taking the bodies?"

"No, but we know who it is," Isaac says. He hesitates. "It's Parrish."

"Parrish?" Derek asks.

"Yeah," Isaac says. "Stilinski doesn't know yet, but Lydia told us about

this recurring dream Parrish has been having every night for a few months, probably ever since he moved here. In it, he's taking bodies to the nemeton."

"So, the dream's not really a dream?" Derek asks.

"Something like that," Isaac shrugs.

Silence lies in the air.

Isaac doesn't want to tell Derek about Donovan, but he worries that, if he lingers, Derek will ask an unavoidable question. So, a little rushed, Isaac says, "I'm exhausted, I'm gonna head up."

"Okay," Derek says, and, thankfully, doesn't call Isaac on the abnormal behavior. "Good night."

"Good night," Isaac echoes. He sets Derek's keys on the coffee table, then turns and rounds the staircase into his bedroom.

Isaac should probably shower away the grime of two days without sleep, but he doesn't. He brushes his teeth, slips off his jeans, and collapses into bed. He doesn't even bother to change out of Scott's hoodie. All he wants to do is close his eyes to the world and drown out the night.

Isaac's phone rings.

It jars him out of his half-sleep state. Rest drips away and brings his eyes open. Isaac already knows who's on the other line, but he checks the caller ID anyway. As expected, it reads with: **Scott**.

Isaac lets the call go to voicemail.

Chapter End Notes

How was this the first Isaac and Stiles hug in forty-four chapters?

Lies of Omission

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 9

Word count: 5,256

It's been five days since Isaac found out about Stiles and Donovan. He hasn't told anyone and he doesn't plan to.

It's gone eerily quiet. They haven't seen the Dread Doctors and they haven't seen any new chimeras, but they're all looking. Even the civilians are searching, though they don't seem to know what it is that they're searching for. Just that it's somebody with two sets of DNA – a genetic chimera.

They all go to school, pretending like nothing's happened, but everyone seems to know. No one is smiling, no one is laughing, like everyone can sense that something's coming. They just don't know what it is, or how bad it's going to be.

Isaac doesn't know what to do. He's pretty sure no one does. Maybe that's why they aren't really talking to each other. It's been five days without a nightly phone call from Scott. Isaac doesn't know how to feel about that. Part of him misses Scott. Isaac can barely sleep these days without hearing his voice. (Derek has taken notice of that. He doesn't ask about it because he's Derek, but he watches Isaac with these sad eyes.) The other part of Isaac is glad for the distance. Because Isaac hasn't had to lie to Scott.

Or maybe *that's* why no one's talking to each other. Not talking makes it easier to keep secrets. And maybe no one's really *lying* about things – maybe it's more like lies of omission.

Maybe the worst lie is to Parrish. No one's told him he's the one taking the bodies. He doesn't seem to remember, and they think he's only really dangerous if someone tries to get in his way. That's why they haven't told Stilinski either. If he knew, he'd definitely get in his way.

Isaac, Stiles, and Lydia are trying to find the bodies. But that means finding the nemeton. They're driving around, searching all of the woods, but the last time they found this thing, three of them had to

almost drown in ice water. Isaac's not entirely sure why Stiles recruited his help with this. He claims it's because Isaac was with Allison when they actually found the nemeton last time, but Isaac thinks maybe it's Stiles' way of keeping him close. Keeping him away from Scott. Isaac hasn't decided if that's a nice gesture or not, if he's protecting Isaac from having to lie or protecting his secret.

"It's almost like this thing doesn't want to be found," Stiles says as they pick through another section of woods.

Isaac really thinks they should stop looking for trees and people that don't want to be discovered. It has never once worked out.

"Maybe it knows we're late to class," Lydia says with a sardonic lilt. She turns on her heel, expression dropping. "Because we've been here twice."

Isaac and Stiles follow her gaze. There's a tree marked with not one, but two white Xs.

"Crap..." Stiles groans. Isaac will second that motion.

Lydia sighs. "Can we talk to Parrish *now*?"

The two of them – Stiles and Lydia – have been going round and round this argument for days. Isaac has long since stopped trying to pick a side and has long since stopped trying to guess who will win.

"Hang on," Stiles says, swiveling back to face her, finger pointing. "If the nemeton's covered in bodies, shouldn't *you* be able to find them?"

"Me?" Lydia questions. (Isaac's not sure if she's faking dumb for convenience, or if she's just genuinely not seeing the connection.)

"Yes, you!" Stiles says, hands waving. "That's what *you* do. You're the banshee, you find the bodies."

"Well, the banshee's having an off day, so," Lydia's tone seeps with impatience, suggesting, "how about we talk to Parrish?" And here they are again, back at the start of the argument. Isaac tips his head back, kicking leaves under his feet. This is pointless.

Stiles shakes his head. He's looking at his hands again. "We can't."

"Why not?" Lydia asks. Her voice is firm, but less callous than before.

"B-Because one of the bodies..." Stiles' volume drops and he steps

forward. “One of them... One of them could be...”

“Could be what?” Lydia asks. *Could be Donovan.*

And maybe that’s why Isaac’s here. Maybe Stiles isn’t protecting his secret from Scott. Maybe he’s protecting it from Lydia – persistent and perceptive and hellbent on bringing Parrish out here.

Parrish, who happens to be a deputy.

“One of them could be a clue,” Stiles lands on.

Lydia nods, lips pursed. Isaac wonders if she knows Stiles is lying. She doesn’t give any indication either way, just says, “I’m leaving now, Stiles. I’m going to talk to Parrish and tell him he’s the one taking the bodies.”

Stiles sighs.

Lydia turns to walk away, but calls over her shoulder, “It’s always better when they know.”

Isn’t that usually Stiles’ argument?

“Well, then he should know he owes me a Jeep!” Stiles yells after her.

And that’s Stiles’ other excuse for dragging Isaac out here with him. Stiles doesn’t have a car at the moment, but Derek was perfectly willing to let Isaac borrow his for a few days. (Isaac’s pretty sure that’s just because Derek is tired of seeing him moping around. Still, Isaac wishes Derek was a little less nice to him. Maybe then he would’ve been saved from the trek through the woods.)

—

Now, Stiles is the one moping. And, now, maybe Isaac understands why Derek was so keen on getting him out of the loft. It’s a miserable sight, watching someone you love look so torn. It sparks pity in Isaac’s gut. And he hates that. And so would Stiles, if he knew. (It’s not the first time Isaac has had this same dilemma, of feelings unwanted by both him and by Stiles. It’s not even the second time.)

“Hey,” Isaac says, when he can’t bear the sight anymore. “Even if Parrish does find the bodies, maybe he won’t want to call it in right away. It does sort of incriminate him too.”

“No,” Stiles sighs. “No, Parrish is one of the good guys. He’ll do what I

couldn't."

There's that self-loathing again. It's such a tired tone. Isaac is sick of it, though he knows that's not fair. It's just hard seeing Stiles like this.

"You called 911, didn't you?" Isaac asks.

"Yeah, and then I hid in my Jeep like a coward," Stiles says.

"But you didn't drive away," Isaac counters.

"Well, yeah, but I was going to," Stiles argues back, like that matters, and maybe it does. Maybe the intent is important, but Isaac's not sure. In his confession, Stiles told Isaac that he was going to leave, but he *couldn't*. Maybe *that's* what matters.

"Stiles. The body was gone and they thought it was a prank call. You'll never know what you would've done if they found the body because that *didn't* happen," Isaac says, trying his best to keep his voice gentle. He doesn't know what Stiles is going through, he's never been in his position. Isaac's just trying to be the best friend he can be. "You need to find a way to shut down these what ifs. You're killing yourself with the wonderings."

"Isn't that exactly what you're doing? With your mom?" Stiles asks. There's a bite to his words. "Aren't you being a little hypocritical?"

Isaac swallows down on, *fuck you*. He tells himself Stiles is just looking out for an outlet, trying to give Isaac a reason to hate him the way he hates himself. Isaac's not going to give into that. He's not going to give Stiles what he wants. That would be the easy way. And they never do things the easy way.

"What's that turn of phrase? 'Do as I say not as I do'?" Isaac fires back, less bitter than the acrid anger in his throat, but still saturated with sarcasm. Then, when Stiles wilts and Isaac starts to feel bad, "Listen, I'm not going anywhere. You can try all you want to push me away, but I can be stubborn too."

"No shit," Stiles says. "If you weren't stubborn, you wouldn't have been able to worm your way into the pack."

"Oh, is that how it happened?" Isaac jokes. "I thought it was more of a Stockholm syndrome situation."

"And in this case who's the captor you fell in love with?" Stiles asks,

and Isaac knows he's teasing, but there's a certain glint in his eyes – the kind of glimmer that spells out trouble.

"Fuck off," Isaac says, not swallowing on the expletive this time. Then, because it needs reiterating, "Whatever Parrish does or doesn't find, I'm with you. Besides, I happen to have some experience being a fugitive. I'll give you tips."

"That's *not* funny," Stiles says, but there's a smile tugging at his lips.

Isaac shrugs, "Humor is subjective."

"You're a horrible person," Stiles deadpans.

"That's subjective too," Isaac says. He has to fight back a grin as Stiles' face contorts in exasperation.

"No. No. That is an objective fact. You can look it up. Isaac Lahey is a h–"

"Do you really want to finish that sentence? Don't forget," Isaac tips his voice into an almost whisper, "I'm your ride out of these woods."

"Was that – Was that a *threat*?" Stiles exclaims, bordering on fake outrage. "I'm still seventeen and you're an adult. I'm pretty sure that's child endangerment."

"I'm pretty sure that's not accurate," Isaac says.

"Do you really wanna find out? I mean, do you *want* to be a fugitive again?" Stiles asks. There's a vaguely joking threat there too.

"That depends," Isaac says, "in this situation, do you die of exposure? 'Cause then it might be worth it."

Stiles makes a ridiculous, practically inhuman sound. Isaac can't hold back his laughter, which just spurs Stiles on.

"Just–" Stiles groans. "Just shut up and drive me to the mechanic. I'm supposed to pick up the Jeep," he looks at the clock on his phone, "two minutes ago. *Shit*."

—

As instructed, Isaac drops Stiles off at the mechanic. He should go to school – he has a test in French – but he doesn't. With Lydia going to talk to Parrish and Stiles picking up the Jeep, the other two won't get

to class for a little while. It gives Isaac's absence plausible deniability. He takes advantage of it.

Isaac rolls the windows down, turns off the radio, and just *drives*.

He doesn't get to do this very often. Isaac's never had a car of his own. He learned to drive under his dad's instruction, which was, predictably, not a very pleasant experience. Then, he spent a good deal of time on public transport. And, now, Derek is basically his chauffeur.

Isaac really does appreciate Derek becoming a permanent and reliable fixture in his life, but this? This is actually kind of fun. There's an independence in driving, one that Isaac isn't used to. This feels like freedom.

This feels like flying.

(Isaac's sure that, if he mentioned *any* of this to Derek, a car of his own would materialize instantly. But Isaac doesn't want that. At least, not from Derek. Maybe that's what Isaac should be saving his money for – a car.)

Isaac doesn't know where he's driving to, but he knows his head feels clearer than it has all week. So, he keeps driving and speeds a little where he thinks he can get away with it.

Instinct leads Isaac to Scott McCall's house.

—

Isaac considers turning around and leaving right then and there. *But...* Scott's motorbike isn't in the driveway. Only Melissa's car is.

Instinct leads Isaac to the doorstep. Instinct brings his hand to the doorbell. Instinct roots his feet to the ground.

Melissa opens the door. As soon as Isaac sees her, he realizes how much he *needed* to. They haven't spent much time together recently – not since before Mexico – but, as soon as Isaac sees her warm McCall smile, he realizes how much he *missed* her.

"Isaac, hi. Um, Scott's not—" Melissa cuts herself off. Isaac's not sure what she sees in him, in the stray that's wandered onto her doorstep again (*hey, at least it's not raining this time*), but her sentence breaks. Instead, she says, "You're here to get the shirt you left, aren't you?"

Okay, come on. Take a seat in the living room, I'll go get it."

And Isaac knows what this is. He knows this is a ploy to get him in the house and comfortable before she strikes. Isaac could deny her. He could turn and walk away and she would let him, but he doesn't. Isaac allows himself to be lured inside and sinks into the couch.

"It's already been washed. I think I got most of the stains out," Melissa says, entering the living room. Isaac is about to thank her, about to protest that she didn't need to do that, but then she's sitting beside him and placing the folded shirt in his lap.

There's a card on top. One with a cake and candles and the words, *Happy Birthday!*

"I hope you don't mind," Melissa says. "Scott mentioned it was your birthday the other day. I wasn't sure if I was going to give it to you, but here you are. So."

Isaac is staring at the card. He thinks he's nodding, but he can't be certain. Tentative, he opens the card.

Happy birthday, Isaac.

Hope this new year brings you lots of happiness, peace, and calm. You deserve it. Stop by anytime, okay? I'm always thinking of you.

— M

The card is short and sweet, but Isaac doesn't miss the ambiguity of the signature. He knows what that *M* is supposed to double for. He could play dumb, he could close the card and give a stilted, *thank you*, but he doesn't.

He could, but he can't.

Isaac looks over at Melissa. His eyes are stinging with tears he doesn't want to fall. He hasn't cried over it yet. He didn't think he needed to, but they're building now, caught in the back of his throat. He swallows thickly, but it does nothing to quell the damage.

"Isaac," Melissa says. There's a sudden urgency to her voice, something worried and concerned, but that's okay. Isaac didn't need his heart anyway. "What's going on?"

"Too much," Isaac says, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes.

“Tell me about it,” Melissa says, genuine. “That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

Isaac shrugs. He supposes that’s true. He hadn’t planned to come here and he hadn’t planned to find Melissa, but, now that she’s sitting at his side, Isaac can’t help but think that it’s perfect. That Melissa is exactly who he needed to see.

“Some of it isn’t mine to share,” Isaac says, thinking of Stiles and the weight that’s forcing on his lungs. He thinks of the distance between him and Stiles being mended, and how the healing only served to drive Scott away. Or to drive *Isaac* away from *Scott*. (The thing is: he doesn’t regret it. He doesn’t regret that conversation with Stiles. He’s glad they talked and he’s glad they’ve pushed together again, but that doesn’t make this any less complicated.)

“Okay,” Melissa says. “That’s okay. Just tell me what you can.”

“I don’t know where to start,” Isaac says. He’s stalling now, but he can’t help it.

Melissa nods and smiles sympathetically. She says, “Start from the beginning.”

—

Isaac feels like he’s told this story a dozen times, though it’s only been twice. Once to Derek and once to Stiles. Three times, if Isaac were to start from Camden and his birthday – the part of the story that Scott knows – but he doesn’t. Maybe he should since that is the *true* beginning, but Isaac knows what he’s here to talk about. He’s here to talk about his mom.

“So, you know how we had to read the book about the Dread Doctors?” Isaac prompts.

“Ah, yes, the hallucinogen book. How could I forget?” Melissa says, drawing a small exhale of laughter from Isaac.

“Right, well, that’s the beginning.” (Kind of.) “The memory I regained was about my family.”

“Okay,” Melissa acknowledges, but she shows no other signs of emotion or opinion. She stays quiet, letting Isaac take his time and tell the story how he sees fit.

“I don’t know how much Scott told you, but each of our memories had to be triggered by something. Mine came when we went into the school basement looking for Kira,” Isaac begins. He looks at the card on his lap, just to give him somewhere to fix his attention that isn’t Melissa’s kind eyes. “The memory started with my dad dragging me down our basement stairs.”

It’s then that Isaac realizes he has no idea how much Melissa actually knows about his dad. Sure, she knows he was abusive, but, when it comes to the details, she could know everything or nothing. It stops Isaac in his tracks, a little panicked and definitely floundering.

“It’s okay,” Melissa says, like she can sense his inner turmoil. “You don’t have to over explain. Just say what feels right.”

Isaac nods. *Okay, okay, just say what feels right. That’s easy. He can do that.* Isaac takes a couple deep breaths.

“It hurt,” Isaac says, and it’s the first time he’s admitted it. It’s the first time he doesn’t try to jump to his dad’s defense. “I thought my arm was going to break.”

Isaac hears a sharp inhale from Melissa, but he doesn’t look. He doesn’t want to see her expression. He doesn’t want to see the anger rushing to the forefront of her chemosignals. If he sees it, he won’t be able to keep going.

“I was scared,” Isaac says. “I didn’t understand.”

“How old were you?” Melissa asks. She’s putting in an effort to keep her voice level and detached. She doesn’t quite succeed, but Isaac appreciates it nonetheless.

“It was my sixth birthday,” Isaac says. And now he has to look away from the card.

Melissa’s gritting her teeth. She looks a little scary, though Isaac isn’t scared. He feels safe at her side. He feels protected. He doesn’t know what to do with that. He just tries not to move at all.

Then, Melissa relaxes her jaw. She doesn’t say anything, but Isaac knows that’s his cue to continue.

“The whole time, I could hear someone pounding on the door upstairs. And, before Dad could do more than bruise my arm, the lock broke and Camden ran down,” Isaac says. This is new too. “He was so brave.

I don't think he was thinking at all. He just got between us and broke Dad's grip. Dad could have—" Isaac clamps down on that line of thinking. It's like he told Stiles: those what ifs will kill you.

Graciously, Melissa lets the implication go unspoken. Instead, she asks, "How old was he?"

"Twelve," Isaac says. His voice cracks a little on the syllable, but he doesn't clear his throat. "The same age I was when he died." He doesn't know why he says it, he wasn't planning to bring it up, but then, "Well, the same age I turned the next day."

Melissa frowns, but she lets that implication lie too – the reason Isaac's birthday is a secret and the reason the card brought tears to his eyes.

"Nothing happened again until after Cam's death," Isaac says. And, this time, it's not a justification. It's just a fact. "I think maybe Dad knew that Camden would tell. Or maybe the blame just got to be too much. Maybe he could handle blaming me for Mom, but Cam was more than he could handle."

Melissa twitches, like she wants to reach out with a comforting hand, but then thinks better of it. Isaac can't decide if he's grateful or disappointed. Melissa asks, "Do you want to explain what you mean by that?"

She's really giving Isaac the option. She's trying to make it abundantly clear that Isaac is in control here. He's running this conversation. He's in the driver's seat.

"Um," Isaac says. It's not a tone of indecision. He knows he's going to explain – the explanation is the heart of it all – he just needs the momentary pause. He needs to ready himself before, "That was the day my mom left. My sixth birthday, I mean."

"Oh," Melissa says. She doesn't sound as shocked as Isaac expected her too. Isaac realizes that maybe she didn't know why his mom wasn't in the picture, which means he has to spell it out, which means he might want to rethink the whole idea of being here.

"Before reading the book," Isaac braces for impact, "I thought my mom had died."

"Isaac," Melissa says, and it's barely a whisper. It's a choked off noise of sympathy.

For once, the pity doesn't make his stomach churn. Finally, the tears spill over.

Isaac doesn't know what it is about Melissa. With her warm smile, her kind eyes, her card on his lap. With her open door and open arms. With Melissa at his side, Isaac finally lets go.

Every protest that he hardly knew his mom, he barely remembers her, he didn't even mourn her... Isaac lets it all go. He lets go of the denial and the tears spring forth like a dam's been broken.

None of the protests matter because her *choice* changes everything. Isaac growing up without a mom wasn't a tragedy. It was a choice. It was *her* choice.

If she hadn't left, would Dad still have blamed Isaac when Camden did the same? If she hadn't left, would Cam have ever shipped out in the first place? If she hadn't left, would Isaac's happy childhood have been real?

Melissa scooches closer to Isaac. Gently, she takes the card and clean shirt from his lap, moving them to the coffee table. Then, with a move that should be difficult with her short stature and Isaac's ridiculous height, Melissa wraps an arm around his shoulders. (Isaac tells himself it's because his height is mostly leg. He ignores the traitorous whisper in his brain, something like, *meant to be*.)

Melissa pulls him in tight and Isaac curls into her, making himself small like always. Though, this time, he isn't doing it to hide. He's curling in closer. He's seeking her comfort and safety and protection. He's searching for the mother he never had.

—

"Sorry," Isaac says when the tears finally stop, when he unfurls from Melissa. He wipes at his eyes, "I didn't think I was going to react like that."

"It's okay," Melissa says. Isaac doesn't need to listen to her heart to hear the truth of it. It's genuine in a potent sort of way. It's almost too much. "You know," she says, "I blamed myself when Raf left. And I spent so long being so *afraid* that, one day, Scott would too."

Though he already knows the answer, Isaac has to ask. "But he didn't?"

Isaac knows for a fact that his dad blamed him. He knows for a fact that he shouldn't blame himself (which, you know, *easier said than done*.)

He doesn't know for sure how Camden felt. And maybe that's the fear, maybe that's part of what makes this so hard. Obviously, Isaac and Cam never talked about it, but Isaac knows his brother. He knows the kind of person he was and he knows how Camden treated him. He cared for Isaac like he was something special, like he was the most important kid in the world. And Isaac looked at him with stars in his eyes, like Camden hung the moon.

It's his opinion that would have mattered, and it's his that Isaac will never know.

"No," Melissa says, as expected. "No, and he had some choice words for his dad when he finally found out exactly what happened." Then, "Listen, Isaac, as much as people might try to make you believe otherwise, *no one* can force another person to do anything. Whatever happened, whatever made your dad blame you, your mom made a choice. That is *not* on you."

Isaac tries not to cry again.

"And do you hate him?" Isaac asks. He clarifies, maybe unnecessarily, with, "Scott's dad?"

"You mean Special Agent Dickhead?" Melissa jokes. Isaac's never heard her use the silly codename. It makes him smile and he knows that was the goal. She returns the faint amusement, and, more seriously, she adds, "No. I don't hate him."

"Why not?" Isaac asks. He thinks he's grasping at straws, just a little. The situations aren't really comparable, but, still.

Melissa shrugs. She takes a while to answer, like she's really thinking it over, like she's really trying to give Isaac everything she can. Eventually, "I loved him once." And, "Our relationship was a mess – I wasn't really joking about that watch – but I did love him, at one point. It's just that... love isn't always enough. And ours was always going to end, but. It's... *hard*. To hate people that you used to love." Then, almost as an afterthought, "And he's the father of my child, so he did something right. I guess."

"Scott's all you," Isaac says. Because, in his mind, it's true. Maybe he doesn't know enough to make a claim like that, but Scott is Melissa in

all the ways that matter.

Melissa smiles. "Thank you."

"When you – When you say, 'love isn't always enough' is that... is that why my mom left?" Isaac's voice sounds as small as he feels. "Did she not love me enough?"

And the question isn't new. It's been pounding at his brain all week, bringing a near constant, splitting headache – one that should be close to impossible.

Melissa makes a soft noise in the back of her throat. "I can't answer that."

And Isaac knew that. It's just... he's desperate. He wants to make this neat. He wants to fold it up with clean lines and sharp edges. He wants to box it up and send it away. He wants to unring that bell.

"For my whole life, I thought my mom died and I thought my dad's abuse didn't start until Cam died," Isaac says. "None of this was *easy* before, but at least it made sense, y'know? I mean, when Mom died it was a tragedy, and... and, with Dad, it was—" Isaac swallows. "Losing Camden destroyed me. It was the worst pain I've ever experienced, so I understood. I *understood* why it changed him. It made *sense*. But now? Now, I find out my mom is alive and just disappeared to who knows where and my dad had that evil in him the whole time and. It's – It's too much."

"It's a lot," Melissa agrees, validating. "Let's take it piece by piece, okay? Start with your mom. What's the real hang up?"

Isaac shrugs. He doesn't know. Maybe it's the fact that she feels so *human* now, no longer a fantasy in his head, but something warped and messy. Maybe it's the fact that her *choice* dictated his entire life, and yet she's escaped his blame by vanishing. Maybe it's the fact that, as hard as Isaac tries, he isn't angry and he doesn't hate her. Maybe it's the fact that, more than anything, he feels sorry – sorry that she felt like she couldn't stay.

"Do you have any interest in trying to find her?" Melissa asks.

Isaac hadn't thought about that, but the answer comes easy. "No." (He tells himself he's respecting her decision, but, really, he's protecting his heart. He can't open that door.) "She's not my family anymore. She made her choice."

Melissa hums. “How did you feel about your mom before all of this?”

“Uh... I don’t know. I guess I had some sadness, but it was less about losing her and more about losing what could’ve been,” Isaac says. He didn’t grieve his mom, but he grieved the idea of her, the life that he could never have.

Isaac might see where Melissa is going with this.

“So,” she says, “why do your feelings about her have to change?”

They don’t.

Isaac has no interest in looking for his mom. He has no interest in looking for answers. He’s already gone through this. He’s already grieved the life he couldn’t have, the life with a mom and a happy family. He’s done this before, so what’s one time more?

“And what about the rest?” Isaac asks. “My dad and Camden.”

“Stop me if I’m overstepping, but I think you’ve always known that your dad was never the person you wanted him to be,” Melissa says.

Maybe Isaac was putting too much emphasis on, “*he didn’t used to.*” Maybe it’s time to grow up and accept the doubt that’s always lingered behind broken excuses. Sometimes people change, but not from the perfect father to the one who locks his son in a freezer. Even Isaac can admit that’s a jump too far.

“Yeah,” Isaac says. He keeps it brief with his dad, can’t say much more than that, but he does go into, “Cam was always trying to shield me from the world. I knew I was his little brother. I knew there were places he wouldn’t go with me. I just never thought this would be one of them.”

“I’m going to ask you something, and I’m not saying this is how you *should* feel, but,” Melissa takes a breath, “do you resent him for leaving when he knew what your dad was capable of?”

“No,” Isaac says at once. “No, definitely not. I... I don’t know if he knew I had forgotten what happened, but he – he gave me a semi-normal childhood for as long as he could. And, before he left, Cam asked for my permission. He would’ve stayed in a heartbeat.”

“He sounds like a good brother,” Melissa says, smiling sadly.

“He was,” Isaac says emphatically, sound breaking under the weight of his conviction. “He was the best brother.”

“And none of this changes that,” Melissa says. “In fact, if anything, it’s a reinforcement.”

Isaac starts to cry again, but, this time, they’re tears of relief. It’s catharsis, it’s release, it’s cleansing.

—

Isaac doesn’t know when it happened, but, by the time he returns to the loft, the sun has set. More importantly though, Isaac is lighter on reentry. He can breathe again, like a weight has lifted. It’s not a perfect fix, but Melissa’s wise words and motherly embrace soothe the sting of his wounds. Isaac’s not quite sorted yet, but he’s untangled. He’s found enough peace that, now, he can let time take on the brunt of his healing.

Derek must sense this because he doesn’t berate Isaac for his late arrival or lack of communication. Instead, he just smiles. Isaac returns it with ease.

Isaac is feeling better than he has all week. He feels tired from the emotional toll of the day, but rejuvenated by the clarity he’s found. He feels secure and regulated. He feels like the sky has opened. He feels okay again. He feels ready to move forward.

And so, once his clean shirt is put away and Melissa’s card is tucked into the drawer of his bedside table, Isaac pulls out his phone. He hovers over the contact, hesitating for one, two, three seconds. He sucks in a breath and takes the plunge. Isaac dials.

Scott’s phone goes to voicemail.

Status Asthmaticus

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 10

Word count: 7,300

Warning: canon typical child abuse

Isaac doesn't try to call Scott again. He doesn't try to text him either. But Isaac does think about him – probably too much. Maybe Isaac should have told Scott about his resurfaced memory right away. Maybe he shouldn't have reacted so harshly to what Scott did to Corey. Maybe he should have offered to help him find Liam and Hayden. Maybe he shouldn't have been so quick to force the distance between them after finding out about Donovan. Maybe he should have answered the phone. Maybe–

Isaac hardly gets any sleep. He's spinning himself in circles. Round and round and round. Until, eventually, he can't take it anymore.

With the afternoon sun in the sky, Isaac goes looking for Derek. He finds him in the kitchen, facing the counter with his back to Isaac. Derek must hear him coming, but he doesn't turn around.

"Hey, Derek?" Isaac asks.

And that gets his attention. Derek's trying to be subtle, but he looks over his shoulder with something close to surprise in his expression. Isaac hasn't been completely silent in the last five – now six – days, but he hasn't initiated a single conversation either.

"Yeah?" Derek says.

"Can I talk to you about something?" Isaac asks. He doesn't have to ask. He knows Derek will say yes, has probably been waiting for this moment all week, but still. (Okay, maybe Isaac's stalling.)

"Sure," Derek says, though he turns towards the counter again. He's only making coffee – Isaac can smell it. Meaning: it doesn't need such unwavering attention. Meaning: he can sense Isaac's vulnerability and he's trying to ease the scrutiny. It's a nice gesture.

Even with permission, Isaac hesitates. He feels silly. He knows deep

down that he's being at least a little bit irrational, but he can't help it. He needs to talk this through. He needs an outsider's perspective and opinion. And, while Derek might be more biased towards Isaac than Scott, he'll be objective. Isaac and Derek don't bullshit each other. Besides, who else is Isaac going to talk to? Stiles is too involved and too teasing. Isaac supposes Lydia is an option, but she might be too judgmental and impatient. Derek is the obvious and only choice. He's accessible and reliable and safe. Isaac knows that.

"Um," Isaac says. "I think I messed things up with Scott."

Derek hums. "What makes you say that?"

"The other night, after Theo found Liam and Hayden, Scott tried to call me. I ignored it on purpose and... we haven't really talked since," Isaac says. He's mumbling, but Derek can hear him just fine.

"Is that why you've been moping around all week?" Derek asks. His eyes flick over his shoulder again and there's a slight glint of humor there, but Isaac lets it slide.

Isaac shrugs. "It's part of it."

"Okay," Derek says, but he doesn't ask for an elaboration here. Instead, he presses forward, "So, what makes you think you messed something up?"

"I tried to call Scott last night, but he didn't answer," Isaac says.

Derek turns around now. His arms are crossed and he's frowning. He's confused. "Isn't that exactly what you did to Scott?"

Isaac huffs. "That was different."

"How?" Derek asks. He's not being dense on purpose and he's not being rude. He's not grilling Isaac, he's just trying to understand. He's trying to help.

"Because that wasn't really about anything Scott did. I mean, it was a little bit about him digging through Corey's memories, but, no, mostly it was – it was about..." Isaac trails off. He can't tell Derek what it was about.

"About Stiles?" Derek guesses.

It nearly makes Isaac jump. His hackles rise, already preparing to

come to the defensive. “What do you know about Stiles?”

“I know enough,” Derek shrugs. He doesn’t offer any more information. Just says, “But that’s not what this is about. This is about Scott. You just said you ignored Scott for reasons that didn’t have much to do with him, right?”

“Right...” Isaac says, slow and tentative. He doesn’t know where Derek is going with this, but he’s pretty sure he’s not going to like it.

“So, who’s to say Scott didn’t ignore you for reasons that had very little to do with you?” Derek says. “There’s a lot going on right now, Isaac. He was probably busy with the next disaster.”

“But why didn’t he call back later? Why didn’t he tell me about what happened?” Isaac asks. He swallows down the pitiful protest of, *he always tells me*.

“Because maybe he’s still in the middle of it, or maybe he doesn’t know where he stands with you either. You created the space, so you’re going to have to be the one to close it,” Derek says.

“So it is my fault?” Isaac questions.

“Isaac,” Derek says, less patient and a little stern. “Stop being difficult and actually listen to what I’m saying. You know exactly why you pulled away from Scott, but he doesn’t. And, after that display with Corey and you choosing not to come with us to the tunnels, I have a pretty good idea of the explanation he’s come up with. Scott’s blaming himself just like you are right now.”

“But what if I can’t explain the real reason?” Isaac asks. Because that’s what’s really freaking him out. He’s worried Scott will be cold and Isaac won’t be able to explain without outing Stiles. He feels caught in the middle again, like he has to choose between Scott and Stiles. But, in this scenario, Isaac *can’t* betray Stiles. So he’ll have to betray Scott.

“Do you miss him?” Derek asks.

It’s such an unexpected redirect that it takes a second for Isaac to compute. He frowns, doesn’t see how it’s relevant, but still practically whispers, “Yeah.”

“Then I’m sure Scott misses you too. He’ll just be glad to have you around and have your help,” Derek says. Isaac isn’t convinced. It must show on his face because Derek continues, “Look. You might not

realize this, but Scott cares about you a lot. I don't think you're capable of messing things up with him."

Maybe Derek is right. Scott couldn't mess things up with Isaac if he tried. Isaac was taken aback and hurt by what Scott did to Corey, but it's not enough to make Isaac hate him. It's not enough to ruin anything, not even close. Maybe that goes both ways.

Isaac nods. "Okay."

Derek returns the nod. It's quiet as the conversation closes. Derek doesn't let the silence stay for long. He changes the subject with, "Braeden's back in town. I'm supposed to go meet up with her."

"Wait, really?" Isaac asks. There's a tone of excitement in his voice. He can't hide it. It sounds like good news.

"Yeah," Derek says. He's smiling something fond. "She's here to help."

"Or she's here to see you," Isaac counters. Because he likes making Derek's life difficult.

It doesn't actually work. Derek just says, "That too."

And that makes Isaac smile. He likes making Derek's life difficult, but he *loves* seeing him comfortable. Derek is so open. Isaac's not sure he'll ever get used to it.

"Have fun," Isaac says – it's genuine, but he forces a teasing lilt. "I'll see you later?"

"See you later," Derek confirms. Then, "It's a supermoon tonight."

Isaac's been so distracted he had almost forgotten. Though, now that Derek's mentioned it, he can already feel the tug of power. It starts in his stomach, just a gentle upward pull, but, in a few hours, it will be a full body sensation. Like the rising tide, in a few hours, Isaac will have to focus to keep his feet anchored to the ground.

Isaac knows what a supermoon is, knows it's a full moon at the same time as perigee – the point of the moon's orbit when it's closest to earth – but, "What does that mean for us?"

"We'll be stronger," Derek says simply.

Isaac pools with a bittersweet kind of sadness. It's a happy thought plagued with grief, the thought of, "Erica and Boyd would have loved

that.”

Isaac hovers over Scott’s contact again. He’s thinking about what Derek said, about how Isaac created the space, so he’s the one who’s going to have to close it. Isaac knows Derek is most likely right, but he’s nervous. The stakes feel so high. Isaac’s never felt unsure in Scott. At least, not like this, not since Scott took him into his home and into his pack.

Isaac hovers over Scott’s contact, but he’s not the one that makes the call. Before Isaac can dial, his phone starts to ring.

“Scott,” Isaac answers with relief in his bones.

“Isaac.”

“Hi, I was – I was literally just about to call you,” Isaac says, chuckling a nervous sort of sound.

Scott gives a soft exhale. Isaac can hear the smile in his voice when he says, “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Isaac says. He’s smiling too.

“*Sorry I missed your call last night. Things got pretty intense yesterday,*” Scott says. It’s exactly the explanation Derek had predicted.

“It’s okay,” Isaac says truthfully. He feels calmer now that the silence between them has been broken. “What happened?”

“*It’s kind of still happening,*” Scott admits. It’s then that Isaac hears his tiredness. “*The Dread Doctors killed a chimera at the school, and then they killed Corey at the hospital, and now Hayden’s dying too.*”

Isaac should have expected this. Death has come for every single one of the chimeras. The pattern was right there, and yet, the thought hadn’t even crossed his mind. Maybe Scott’s relentless optimism is finally starting to rub off on him, or maybe he’s just been too distracted. Whatever the reason, Isaac hadn’t even considered the possibility that Corey would be next.

Corey is dead.

Isaac’s heart is in his stomach. He barely knew Corey, but the two times they met, he held only a sad sort of sympathy for the boy. He

barely knew Corey, but the news hurts. Isaac hurts for the boy in the hospital bed and the boy with Scott's claws in his neck.

"Isaac?"

"Yeah," he says. "I'm here, sorry." Then, "What's going on with Hayden?"

Isaac knows Hayden even less than he knew Corey – he's pretty sure she wouldn't even know his name – but he still doesn't want her to die. She's innocent. And they've lost too many innocent lives.

"The Dread Doctors came after her. Theo, Liam, and I stopped them from killing her right then and there, but they injected her with that silvery substance," Scott explains. *"We took her to the animal clinic and my mom is treating her for mercury poisoning but... it doesn't look good."*

Isaac doesn't really know Hayden, but he does know that she's Liam's girlfriend. And if she's dying, then Isaac knows exactly what kind of thoughts are running through Scott's mind. Thoughts of Allison and history repeating and–

"I'll come join you," Isaac says without hesitation.

"Really?" Scott sounds genuinely surprised by the offer. It's a reminder that they definitely need to have a more in depth conversation about this week. But... later. They have to get through the night first. *"I thought I was going to have to do some more groveling to get you here."*

"You were calling to invite me?" Isaac asks, and, honestly, he sounds kind of surprised too.

"Well, more like to ask for your help," Scott says. *"I – I'm worried about Liam and the supermoon."*

And for good reason. Liam's control is a tricky and fickle thing. With the moon's pull heightened and Hayden's life touch and go, loss of control is almost guaranteed.

"I'll be there in ten minutes," Isaac says.

"Oh, you – you don't have to come right away. There's not much to do here besides wait," Scott says.

"There's not much to do at the loft either," Isaac shrugs even though Scott can't see him. "We can keep each other company."

Isaac doesn't say it, but he doesn't want to be alone right now. He's spent too much of the last six days alone.

"I'm not going to be able to convince you, am I?"

"I'll be there in ten minutes," Isaac repeats.

Scott laughs and, though it sounds a little hollow, it lights Isaac up inside.

—

Isaac shows up at the animal clinic nine minutes later. He finds Scott sitting in the front waiting room. He's slumped down in a chair, practically turned sideways with his legs hanging over the arm. (Isaac tries not to think of him and Lydia sitting in these chairs, waiting for the sacrifice and waiting for Young Derek.)

For a second, Isaac thinks Scott has fallen asleep, but then his eyes flutter open. His attention lands on Isaac and a small smile flits across his features.

"Hey," Isaac says.

"Hi," Scott responds.

The air hangs a little stiff between them, but it's good. It's fine. Isaac's happy to be here and he's happy to be seeing Scott, even if the circumstances aren't ideal.

Scott pats the seat next to him and Isaac joins him.

"You look tired," Isaac says.

"Wow," Scott says. His tone is monotone and unimpressed, but he's still smiling. "Thanks. Barely see you all week and that's all you have to say to me?"

Isaac just laughs and admits, "I haven't really been sleeping either."

Scott frowns. "S—"

"If you're about to say sorry, don't you dare. Not everything is your responsibility," Isaac says, cutting Scott off.

And that makes Scott laugh, hard enough that he has to drag his legs off the arm of the chair and tip his body forward.

Isaac stares at him blankly, waiting for an explanation.

“I was—” Scott gasps against his laughter. “I was going to say,” he peels into another fit of giggles, “I was going to suggest that we go check on Hayden.”

Isaac pales. “Oh.”

“You know, that’s the second time you’ve done that,” Scott says. He’s grinning and appears to be fighting the urge to continue his laughter.

“What are you talking about?” Isaac asks.

“After Stiles was rescued from sleepwalking into the coyote den, you – you did that thing. Where you thought I was going to say something and launched into a rant,” Scott says.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Isaac says. “In fact, really, that says more about you and your savior complex than anything else.” Then, moving to his feet, “So. Hayden?”

Surprisingly, Scott lets him get away with it. He follows Isaac to his feet and then leads them both into the back room where Melissa, Liam, and Hayden are waiting. Melissa looks up when they enter. She smiles at Isaac, not dissimilar to the way Scott had greeted him out front. Isaac tries to return the smile, but he’s distracted by the sight of Hayden. She’s got an IV in her arm, but whatever medicine they’re administering doesn’t seem to be working. Her skin is sickly pale and damp with beads of sweat. If Isaac is honest, she looks horrible.

A little uncomfortable, Isaac pulls his eyes away from her. They land on Liam instead. He’s twisted with palpable concern and hints of reactionary anger.

“It’s not working, is it?” Liam asks, thinking the same thing as Isaac.

“She should be showing signs of improvement,” Melissa says. She reaches out, one hand holding Hayden’s and the other stroking over her slick hair. “Hayden?”

Melissa is so gentle and soft with it, slipping into a bedside manner that Isaac is plenty familiar with.

“Call Val,” Hayden breathes, just a scratch of sound in the back of her throat. “My sister... Valerie...”

“She’s a deputy,” Liam supplies.

Just then, Scott’s phone buzzes. He pulls it from his jacket pocket. He takes a second to read, then looks up at the group. “I think I know where she is,” he says. “Theo just texted me about the high school. He said there’s cops everywhere. Might be another chimera.”

“Um, my sister...” Hayden whispers. Her voice breaks, “I don’t want to die without my sister.”

Isaac’s heart clenches. He tries to bury thoughts of Cam, but it hardly works.

“I’ll get her,” Scott says, like a reassurance, like a *promise*.

“W-Wait, what are you going to tell her?” Liam asks.

“If I have to, I’ll tell her everything,” Scott says.

Isaac doesn’t like that look in Scott’s eye or that tone in his voice. He sounds remorseful and serious and empty. Isaac doesn’t trust it. Besides, he’s not sure he can handle witnessing another death. So, eager to get out of here and eager to stay with Scott, it’s easy for Isaac to say, “I’ll come with you.”

The school sign is in the middle of the hallway. It’s ripped through the ceiling and severed in half. There’s no more detail needed. That’s it. That’s what Isaac and Scott find when they enter the school.

The two of them share a look. Shock and horror pass between them. Confusion settles in the air. This shouldn’t even be possible.

Scott’s phone vibrates, drawing them out of their stunned daze.

“It’s Lydia,” he says. “She’s in the library.”

Isaac nods his head in the direction of the school library, gesturing for Scott to, “Go meet with her. I’ll look around for Clarke.”

Scott agrees and the two split up.

The school sign is blocking the entire entry hallway. Isaac couldn’t go around it even if he wanted to. Instead, he has to loop around and through the academic halls.

There was only one police car left in the parking lot, but it could be Clarke. Isaac has to at least check. He walks slowly and trains his hearing for signs of life – breathing, footsteps, heartbeats, *anything*. He searches with caution and care. He really takes his time, really wants to pull through for Hayden in her final moments.

But there's no one here.

Eventually, Isaac has no choice but to give up. He jogs to the library with the intention of reporting his findings (or lack thereof) to Scott. For Hayden's sake, Isaac tries to keep his hopes up. If Lydia is with Scott, there's a chance she would've seen Clarke. Last Isaac heard, Lydia was at the station with Parrish. She could've seen Clarke there or even upon arrival at the school. She could help. It's not over yet.

Except, as Isaac rounds the corner, he knows instantly that something is amiss.

"Isaac! No!"

Isaac feels it before he sees it. A crackling whir, a thrumming in his skin, an invisible barrier. Isaac looks down at his feet.

There's a line of mountain ash circling the library. Scott is on the wrong side of it.

The setting sun paints the library with a faintly orange glow. On any other occasion, the backdrop would be picturesque. It should be calm and beautiful, but, instead, it's sinister. Instead, it's an eerie reminder of the passage of time and the moon that's coming.

The supermoon is coming and Scott is on the wrong side of a ring of mountain ash. Isaac can see him, but he can't help him. He's just out of reach.

But that's not all. There's a soft ringing beep, a hum of power, a sound nearly inaudible to the human ear. It's a modified cell phone jammer. And standing next to it is Theo Raeken.

He's staring at Isaac. He's radiating anger and something worse. His signature smile is gone.

"Seriously? You? Again?" Theo is fuming and fast approaching and it's starting to click, but Isaac is too slow to react. "You're just *always* around, aren't you? Trailing after Scott like some lost puppy."

Before Isaac can do more than blink, a fist collides with his jaw and darkness cradles him in its embrace.

Isaac wakes up in the janitor's closet. He doesn't know how long he was out for, but he knows there's something pushed up against the door. He knows it's far too familiar. He knows he's spiraling.

Out. Out. Out.

"Come on. Come on," Isaac whispers. Lacrosse practice ran over. He was five minutes late for his shift at the cemetery. This isn't an appropriate response. His brain knows that, but his body doesn't. His brain knows that this will end eventually, but his body doesn't. His brain knows that fighting won't do anything, but his body doesn't. All his body knows is...

Isaac's claustrophobia had been getting so much better. He could ride in an elevator with only a shudder of breath, he could find his anchor, he could hold it together longer than this. But that was before...

Out. Out. Out.

Isaac's fists slam against the door. The chain of the freezer rattles and the hinges creak, but they don't give. They never do. Isaac has tried it all. Furled fists, open hands, blunt fingernails, fingernails grown out long past needing a trim. Isaac has tried it all, but the door won't open. There's no escape, but still Isaac tries for...

The Dread Doctors. That was before the Dread Doctors. That was before the book and that stupid, stupid, stupid memory. That was before Isaac's father stood before him in fresh and real and vivid focus. That before his grip seared into his arm. That was before...

Out. Out. Out.

Isaac's screaming too. Sometimes wordless and sometimes pleas. They won't be heard. Or, if they are, they won't be answered. There's no mercy. There's no saving grace. There's no Camden to step between them. There's just Isaac and Dad. There's just...

The hallucination. That was before the hallucination. That was before the freezer full of sand and the voice of Isaac's mother. That was before...

Out. Out. Out.

The fight in Isaac won't last. It can't last. He doesn't have it in him, but he can't give up. Still, he keeps clawing. Still, he keeps punching. Still, he keeps kicking. Still, he keeps screaming. Still, he holds out hope for...

Theo. That was before Theo. That was before his scent of grief and his words of Tara twisted in Isaac's head. That was before Theo fit his fingers under the fragile hinge of Isaac's buried pain. That was before Theo pried the box open. That was before Theo unleashed it all. That was before...

Out. Out. Out.

Isaac let Theo in. That was before Isaac let Theo in. He didn't pry Isaac open. Isaac let him in. He let himself be swayed and blinded by shared agony. He let himself be tricked and fooled. He let himself be quiet. He let...

Out. Out. Out.

He let Theo into his deepest hurt. He let it happen and, all along, Stiles had been right. Theo was a chimera. Theo was working with the Dread Doctors. Theo was manipulating them. Theo was...

Out. Out. Out.

Theo was the one creating the space between them. Theo, who knew about Camden. Theo, who knew about Kira. Theo, who knew about Donovan. Theo, who...

Out. Out. Out.

Theo, who had a plan. Theo, who had gotten to all of them. Theo, who had Scott trapped and cornered and alone.

There's no else coming. There's no one Isaac can get through to. There's no one who would notice their disappearance in time. There's no one who knows where they are. There's...

Out. Out. Out.

There is one person.

Out. Out. Out.

Liam.

Out. Out. Out.

Isaac remembers the pain and anger in Liam's scent. He remembers the desperation of his first love slipping out of reach. He remembers the full moon rising. He remembers the way he wouldn't quite meet Scott's eye. He remembers...

Out. Out. Out.

He remembers that a werewolf can't steal a true alpha's power. Only a beta of their own making can. And, as Theo had so helpfully pointed out, *Liam* is Scott's beta.

Isaac can't be sure, but, if it's power that Theo wants then...

Out. Out. Out.

Theo had made it so clear that he was here for Scott, he was here for a pack, he was here for a true alpha.

Out. Out. Out.

He wasn't here for a true alpha. He was here for a true alpha's *power*. He was here to steal it.

Out. Out. Out.

There's no one coming to help. There's no one who will be looking for them, and, even if there is, Isaac has to assume that Theo has a plan for that. He has to assume that Theo is three moves ahead of them. Because he has been this whole time.

Out. Out. Out.

Isaac has to assume that there's no hope of being saved. Isaac has to assume that it's up to him to be the hero.

—

If Isaac's going to get out of here, if he's going to save Scott, he has to calm down. Fear can bring strength and survival, but this isn't just fear. Isaac is in a state of sheer panic. His mind is racing almost as fast as his heart. If he doesn't calm down, he's going to hurt himself.

Isaac needs to get out of the frazzled anger. He needs to get focused. He needs to be anchored. And so, he thinks of Derek. He thinks of his home at the loft, thinks of the couch and after-nightmare tea. He thinks of Derek's hand gripping his, thinks of reassurance in green eyes and the switch from red to blue. He thinks of Derek coming back

every time, he thinks of dependability and...

I care about you too.

Isaac tugs at every memory. He harnesses that feeling of comfort, family, belonging. Isaac locks in on it and he doesn't let go. He pulls the tide back in, he pulls his feet back to the ground, he pulls control into his bones.

Isaac opens eyes he didn't know were shut. He blinks in the dark of the janitor's closet. He stares at shelves of paper towels and cleaning supplies. He steps out of the freezer and into reality.

Isaac finds control, but he loses his fear. It drains from his body and his strength goes with it. He presses all his weight on the door, he pushes with everything he can muster, but it doesn't give. It never does.

Isaac is dripping with sweat and old tears and tiredness. He's been here before. He's been in this same closet. Back then, he gave it his all, but he never achieved escape. All Isaac managed to do was hurt Allison (and that's a door he *really* shouldn't open).

Isaac has been here before. He knows what this is. This is hopeless.

—

Isaac doesn't know how long it's been. He's slumped down, back against the door and head hanging between his arms. He should get up. He should do something. He should at least *try*.

But he can't.

Isaac's not run by anger like Liam or Derek. It's fear that gives Isaac strength. It's fear that allows him to shift, but fear gives way to panic and panic shatters his control. Panic will cut Isaac loose, it will send him back into the freezer, it will hurt him before it will save Scott.

Isaac's not sure when he started to care about his own well-being. Maybe it was somewhere between Derek's sacrifice and Allison's. Or maybe it started before that, maybe it started with...

No, I mean you. I don't want you getting hurt.

But Isaac's had a long time to think, and, as it stands, things seem more than hopeless. Theo has torn their pack to the ground. He's

pushed Kira to the desert, he's pulled Scott and Stiles apart, he's pushed Isaac backwards.

Theo has pushed and pulled and pushed and pulled. He's torn open cracks and he's sent them to the edge. And, now, the pack lies in disarray. Now, Isaac is shrinking inward, shrinking away, shrinking into nothing. Isaac is caving into fear.

Theo has pushed Isaac back into the person he was before Allison, before he dedicated his life to her honor, before he decided he couldn't live in fear's shadow anymore.

But Isaac's had a long time to think, and, if all seems hopeless, then what else does he have to lose? If Theo has ruined everything, if he's torn apart the only thing Isaac cares about, then what's the fear in getting hurt?

If Isaac doesn't get up, if he doesn't do something, if he doesn't try... then his demons win. Theo's done a lot of damage, but Isaac *can't* let him undermine Allison. He has to draw the line somewhere.

And so, Isaac pushes himself to his feet.

Isaac doesn't need fear. He doesn't need it to keep him safe anymore. He doesn't need it to control the shift. He needs something else. He needs something stronger. He needs...

P.S. You don't need ice cream or a uniform to be a hero.

Theo used Camden. He took Isaac's deepest pain and contorted it to fit his needs. It's a violation. It feels dirty and scarred and wrong. It makes Isaac seethe. It makes Isaac's eyes flash yellow. It makes Isaac's teeth grind against a growl.

But then... Isaac remembers Parrish. Theo doesn't know it, but his plan backfired. He wanted to distract Isaac, he wanted to break him down, he wanted to push him into the shell of a kid that he used to be. Theo doesn't know it, but he *failed*. He pushed Isaac into Parrish and Parrish pushed him into relief. Isaac found connection and that brought him healing.

Pain makes you human and anger unlocks the shift, but those are inherently lonely emotions. Isaac isn't alone anymore and he hasn't been for a long time. Even if the pack is breaking, they're not finished.

Theo's not a real werewolf. That much is clear now. Which means he

doesn't understand what it means to be pack. He doesn't understand that wolves can't survive on their own. Theo did superficial damage – and a lot of it – but he doesn't understand just how much the pack *need* each other. They're tied together with bonds that can't be broken.

Pain makes you human and anger unlocks the shift, but they've found a better way. They've found connection and belonging and pack. *That* is Isaac's anchor. *That* is what keeps him human. *That* is what's going to get him out of here.

Isaac's trust in the pack is enough to keep him feeling safe, and that's enough to keep the panic at bay and keep him in control. So, why can't it be enough to fuel the shift?

And, when Isaac tries, it's easy. His connections are so firm that it's *easy* to find the shift. It's easy for his claws and fangs to grow, for hair to sprout from his cheeks, for his eyes to shine with liquid gold.

Isaac does something. He starts pushing on the door and trying to escape. It cracks open, but doesn't give. Isaac waits for the telltale tug of panic, but it doesn't come. He stays rooted in the janitor's closet, in the memories of pack, in the present moment. The only tug he feels is the tug of the moon.

I hope it makes us stronger.

And that's the other thing: this isn't any full moon. This is a supermoon. Isaac has access to more power than he ever has before. Isaac has more ability to save his friends than ever. He has to take advantage of that.

Isaac tries. With Erica and Boyd's memory fresh in his mind, with that first experience of pack, he pushes. Isaac presses on the door. The tide rises and his strength floats with it, gaining force until...

The vending machine tips and the door gives.

—

The school has gone dark, but it has no effect on Isaac. His powers are running in overdrive, pushing past peak performance into something greater. Something *stronger*.

This time, Isaac doesn't search the school with care or caution. There's already signs of life. Isaac follows them. He runs towards the library and towards Scott and towards the racing heartbeat.

Except, as Isaac rounds the corner, he finds the unexpected.

The mountain ash barrier has been broken. There's no thrum or whirl or crackle of invisible force.

And it's not Scott's heartbeat.

It's Mason's. He's kneeling next to a body with crimson on his hands and dry streaks on his cheeks. Isaac can smell it. He can smell the metallic tang of blood and the salt of tears. It's oversaturated, the strongest thing Isaac has ever smelled. It's so pungent he can *taste* it. The scent settles in the back of his throat. It chokes him from the inside out, it burns, it runs him dry.

There's no barrier keeping Isaac still, but he doesn't come any closer. In fact, he stumbles out of the doorway. Like, if he backs up, he can back out of this moment. He can reverse time and it'll be like this never happened, it'll be like Scott isn't—

Isaac's movement catches Mason's attention. He looks up at Isaac with wide, scared eyes. The blood isn't just on his hands. It's practically everywhere, like he tried to use his whole body to keep it in, to keep Scott from—

"I..." Mason tries to speak, but Isaac can't hear him. All he can hear is their hearts. Mason's is fast, but Isaac's is faster. It's going to give out in his chest, but not before the pounding in his skull splits him open. The pressure builds as the heartbeats keep getting louder, a constant reminder that Scott doesn't—

Isaac steps into the library.

As soon as the threshold is crossed, his resolve crumbles and he can't hold back. He doesn't remember how he got to Scott's side, if he ran or walked or skipped, but he remembers the impact of his knees hitting the ground. His bones crack under the force, but he doesn't feel it. All he feels is Scott's wrist under his fingers.

Isaac's hold is gentle and precise. He cups his hand around Scott's wrist, just as he did in Scott's bedroom all those months ago, and stays completely still. He doesn't want to miss it. He waits to feel it or hear it or both. He waits for...

Nothing.

The heartbeat doesn't come. Isaac can't breathe. He knows he's

squeezing Scott too hard, but he doesn't want to let go. He would wait forever if he could. He would wait forever for a heartbeat that's not coming, for a heartbeat that's not coming because...

Scott is dead.

Just like with Corey, Isaac should have considered this a possibility. He knew this is where Theo's plan would lead, but he didn't think it would actually happen. He didn't think this *could* happen.

Scott is always the one left standing. Even when the odds were stacked so high they couldn't see over, Scott always overcame. Scott always found a way. Scott always made it through. Doing the impossible was Scott's thing, and, now, he's done it one last time.

He's done the one thing Isaac never thought he would.

Isaac has lost so much. His entire family, Erica and Boyd, Allison. Hell, even Derek had seemingly died once before. Isaac has lost so much, but he never thought it would come to this.

Scott was supposed to be the exception. Scott was supposed to survive. Scott was supposed to be the hero.

But Isaac knows better than anyone that the hero's story often ends in tragedy. Isaac knows better than anyone that heroes aren't invincible. They act and fight like no one can hurt them, but they're just as vulnerable as everyone else – maybe even more so. Maybe their willingness for sacrifice, to jump in between, maybe... maybe it makes this inevitable.

Scott is dead.

His death was always the biggest threat. His life was always the thing hanging in the balance, but, now that they're here, Isaac doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know how he's supposed to continue. How is anyone supposed to carry on without Scott?

Scott isn't just the reason Isaac is alive, he isn't just the reason Isaac knows how to trust, he isn't just the reason Isaac feels safe. Scott is more than what he means to Isaac. Scott is more than any one person ever should be. Scott is a hero and a leader and a *symbol*.

Scott's death has always been the biggest threat because it's the worst thing that could happen to the world. Losing Scott is the worst thing that could happen to Beacon Hills, to supernaturals, to everyone.

Losing Scott is the worst thing that could happen for hope.

Scott's death is going to ripple through space and time, Scott's death is going to change everything, Scott's death is more than just a one person calamity. Scott's death is going to be a massacre, Scott's death is going to cost more innocent lives than Isaac can fathom, Scott's death is going to be felt for miles.

And yet... all Isaac can focus on is how this is *destroying* him.

Isaac knows it's selfish. He knows Scott's death is a loss for everyone, but all he can focus on is how it's a loss for himself.

Isaac will never see that crooked jaw smile again. He'll never experience the way that Scott *lights* with joy. He'll never experience that goofy grin. He'll never experience the pure, unfiltered, unabashed display of emotion.

Isaac will never see those warm brown eyes again. He'll never experience the intensity of those eyes. He'll never experience the deep, inward gaze. He'll never experience being so seen and so accepted. He'll never experience looking in those eyes and the feeling of coming home.

Isaac will never see those squared shoulders and straightened back. He'll never experience being in the presence of Scott's leadership. He'll never experience that unrivaled determination. He'll never experience seeing that strength and *knowing* that he would follow Scott anywhere.

Isaac will never hear Scott say his name again. He'll never experience that tug of something greater than fear. He'll never experience that click of something certain, like a key in a lock, like two pieces meant to work together. He'll never experience that level of trust. He'll never experience that safety in Scott guiding him to reality. He'll never experience that nickname or that familiarity or that connection.

Isaac will never hear Scott answer a phone. He'll never experience those late night stories. He'll never experience the sound of Scott's breath, lulling him into rest. He'll never experience that routine of something so predictable. He'll never experience that hushed laughter, the bubble of joy that turns Isaac's center to honeyed sweetness.

Isaac will never feel Scott's touch. He'll never experience Scott's hand on his shoulder and the warm weight of being protected. He'll never experience Scott's arms around him and an embrace like glue. He'll never experience two hands intertwined like something out of fate.

He'll never experience a touch so careful and safe and warm.

Isaac is holding Scott's limp wrist, but he can't feel him anymore.

The tears have started to fall, but Isaac hardly notices them. All he notices is the feel of Scott's skin. Isaac expects him to be cold, remembers the chill of the hospital plan, but Scott is *warm*. And maybe it's because Isaac is pushing his own life into Scott's wrist, but Isaac doubts it. He thinks that, even in death, the sun still shines from within Scott McCall.

Maybe it should be a reassurance, maybe it should give Isaac hope that there's still a chance, but it doesn't. Somehow, the warmth makes it worse. It tells Isaac only one thing: this is his fault.

Scott is still warm and that means this isn't an old tragedy. This is fresh and new, this is bubble wrapped and unopened. This is something Isaac could have prevented.

He was in that janitor's closet for too long. He was just sitting there and Scott was *dying*. Isaac was hopeless and certain there was nothing else to lose, but he's been proved so, so, so wrong.

Scott *is* hope. As long as his heart beat and his lungs had breath, it was never hopeless, there was always something more to lose, it wasn't over.

But it is now.

There's no heartbeat and there's no breath. Scott is empty and hope is gone and Isaac can't take it because it's his fault. He had the strength inside him all along, he could've gotten out sooner, he could've stopped this. Isaac could have saved Scott, just as he had done for Isaac so many times, but he failed.

Isaac let Scott be his everything. Isaac let Scott give him safety and comfort and belonging. Isaac let Scott save him time and time again, but he couldn't return the favor just once. He couldn't save him just the one time. He couldn't—

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight."

The regret pours down around Isaac. It seizes his lungs and limbs. It takes him captive and turns him stiff and broken. It makes him ache. It makes him burn. It makes him cry.

“What are you doing?”

Regret. For trusting Theo and not realizing his ill intent. For allowing Theo to use the pain of Camden. For not keeping cautious like he promised Stiles he would.

“Bringing him back!”

Regret. For how he left things with Scott. For not finishing that conversation. For not saying more. For not explaining. For not letting him in. For not fixing things while they still had a chance.

“But his – his heart. He... He hasn’t had a pulse in over fifteen minutes. You can’t bring someone back that’s...”

Regret. For all the things he let keep him from reaching out. For letting the memory scare him. For letting the claws scare him. For letting Donovan scare him. For letting the distance scare him.

“He’s not someone. He’s my son. And he’s an alpha. And he’s too strong to die like this! Come on!”

Regret. For being scared at all. For letting fear work its way back into his heart and mind. For letting himself regress into that shell of being. For letting fear make him small, too small to state his own opinion.

“Open your eyes and look at me, okay? Come on. Breathe, baby, breathe.”

Regret. For keeping quiet. For not having trust in his friends being good. For not having the bravery to say what he thought about Theo. For letting that perspective go to waste. For being unsure in the people that he was supposed to rely on.

“Melissa, it’s—”

Regret. For not preventing this. For not trusting in himself. For not sticking to his gut and his intuition. For not having the confidence to value his own thinking.

“Shut up! He’s too strong to die like this!”

Regret. For not breaking out sooner.

“Come on. You can do this. You’re an alpha. You’re an alpha!”

Regret. For not being brave.

“Come on. Roar. Come on! Come on, Scott!”

Regret.

“Roar!”

Scott comes to consciousness with a shock. It’s not a steady, gradual thing. He gasps violently, and then...

He roars.

The sound bursts from deep in Scott’s chest. It erupts around them, shaking the ground and vibrating Isaac’s hold on his wrist. It rattles Isaac’s bones – the call of his voice, of his alpha, of *Scott*.

Scott is alive. A little more so than most.

His heart starts to beat beneath skin, pressing into Isaac and waking him up and up and up. Scott’s lungs shudder with breath, a soft sound, but the most beautiful sound. His eyes tear open, burning red and bright and brave.

Scott is alive. And, in that moment, Isaac knows. He loves him.

The Last Chimera

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 11

Word count: 8,228

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Isaac sits on the loft couch. It's just as comfortable as it's always been, but, still, it feels different. Everything feels different now.

Isaac stares blankly forward. He knows Derek is worried about him, can sense it in his chemosignals and the way he hovers, but Isaac makes no moves to reassure him. Isaac doesn't know how to do that. His mind feels both empty and searing all at once. So much has happened in such a short span of time. Isaac doesn't know how to cope with it, so he goes silent and numb.

That is, until his phone rings.

Isaac about jumps out of skin, but reaches for it on instinct. He expects it to be Scott – *wants* it to be Scott – but it's not. It's Melissa. Alarm bells ring alongside the phone, irrational fear surging up inside Isaac. Thoughts like: *the relief was only temporary* and *Scott's died again*.

To put them to rest, Isaac immediately answers the call. "Hello? Melissa?"

First she says, "*Hi, Isaac.*" Second, "*Take a deep breath. It's not an emergency.*" And last, "*Stiles is at the hospital. His dad is going into surgery and Stiles – Stiles is asking for you. He won't let me call anyone else.*"

"What happened?" Isaac asks. The fear is simmered, but it's still there. This can't be good.

"*I'll tell you more when you get here.*" Then, "*You'll come, won't you?*"

"Yeah, yeah, of course," Isaac says. "I'll be there."

His words lead into a short goodbye and then the call ends.

As soon as his phone clicks off, Isaac is on his feet and making towards the door. He expects Derek to follow right away – he could hear the entire exchange – but he doesn't move.

Firmly rooted, Derek says, “Isaac.” And when he gets ignored, repeats a little stronger, “*Isaac.*”

“What?” he bites. Isaac’s forced to come to an abrupt stop, only because, if he storms out any further, he’ll be in the hallway.

“Slow down,” Derek says, words enunciated and dragged out, like an example of his suggestion. “Look at yourself. You’re still *covered* in Scott’s blood. Melissa said Stilinski is going into surgery right now, which means you have time to, at the very least, take a shower.”

Isaac glances down at his hands. They’re sickly red. It makes his stomach churn. It pierces Isaac’s ready facade and he deflates like a tired balloon.

A shower would do him some good.

—

Scott’s blood pools in the drain as too hot water falls on Isaac’s shoulders. Isaac’s skin comes clean, but his mind is still muddled with the night’s events.

“*Isaac, let me take you home.*” Derek’s words had run off Isaac like the blood from his hands. He tried to free Scott’s wrist from Isaac’s grip, but it had been a struggle. Isaac fought like a child, fought a losing battle with protests of, “*I can’t! Not without Scott!*”

But, once they left the library and Scott was out of sight, Isaac shut down. He’s still in that haunted state now, though the rain of water is trying to wake him up.

Isaac’s not sure he wants to wake up, is the thing. Waking up means moving forward. And, while one tragedy has been narrowly avoided, escaping meant fleeing into another.

Isaac loves Scott.

He’s not sure how long it’s been true, but, now that he knows, everything is different. Everything has changed. And there’s no going back.

When Isaac's skin is clean, Derek tries to convince him to eat something. Isaac refuses. His stomach is twisted in knots and the mere thought of food nearly makes him gag. Instead, Derek makes him after-nightmare tea and puts it in an insulated tumbler to keep it warm. Then, he drives Isaac to the hospital with a heavy silence between them.

Now, they sit outside the front entrance. Derek has pulled up only to the side of the curb, meaning he's not coming in, meaning Isaac has to go in alone.

Isaac doesn't want to. He doesn't want to talk to Derek, but he doesn't want to leave his comfort either. There's something reassuring about being close to him. Everything has changed, but their relationship hasn't. It's solid and steady and Isaac feels a little more stable in his presence.

"Come on, Isaac. Stiles is waiting," Derek says, a gently framed direction. When Isaac still doesn't budge, Derek promises, "I'll be nearby, but I'm not coming in. You and I both heard Melissa. Stiles was only asking for you."

Isaac nods. "Okay."

Derek has a point and it's easier to listen than it is to protest, so Isaac exits the car. Derek doesn't drive away until Isaac is safely inside the building. He does the same thing at the comic store and sometimes at school too. Usually, it gives Isaac a unique form of embarrassment, but not tonight. Tonight, it warms his freezing hands and heart.

Melissa is waiting in the lobby for him. She greets him with one of those McCall smiles, though it's duller than Isaac is used to. He blocks her pained voice from his mind and returns a tight smile of his own.

"Hey, hun," Melissa is sympathetic and a little sad. Isaac tries not to flinch. "Doing okay?"

Isaac shrugs. "Shaken," he says, more honest than he intended to be. Melissa often has this effect on him. "But Scott's okay, so..."

(So... I'll be okay. So... I'm in love with your son.)

Melissa nods, like she understands, like she's feeling the same way. And she must be, she must feel as ruined as Isaac does, if not more.

She's seen her son dead not once, but *twice*. They agreed on never again. They agreed to never see Scott like that again. Isaac was supposed to stop Scott, he had told Melissa he would, but he failed her. He—

"Well," Melissa says, graciously cutting through Isaac's internal tirade. "Theo attacked Stilinski too. Stiles was able to find him before it was too late, but we still don't know if he's going to pull through or not."

Isaac grits his teeth against the rise of anger. Theo continues to stoop to new lows.

"How's Stiles holding up?" Isaac asks. Because that's what's important. This is about Stiles and his dad. This isn't about Isaac's fury. There will be plenty of time to be angry later when everyone is safe.

Melissa shakes her head. She holds a hand up to her mouth, covering it, like she's physically holding back her emotion. Isaac stays patient as she swallows and inhales and collects herself.

"He's scared," is what Melissa says. And Isaac figures that's only the tip of the iceberg, but he doesn't ask for more. Melissa's voice is already thick with tears. She sounds choked up and tired, but she won't be leaving. She'll stay until fate swings either way. She won't leave Stiles alone in this, and neither will Isaac.

—

Stiles hugs Isaac right away. Isaac is a little caught off guard by the sudden rush of contact, but he doesn't pull away. He hugs back just as fiercely, holding Stiles close and taking as much comfort as he gives.

They stay that way for a while. Until, eventually, Stiles seems to think better of himself and breaks the embrace. He flicks his gaze awkwardly between Isaac and the floor, running his hands on the seams of his jeans in an anxious movement. The anxiety hangs like a cloud over his head. Isaac wishes he could clear the skies and bring him peace, but he can't. All he can offer is company.

And so, he sits with Stiles in uncomfortable hospital chairs. He says, "Are you sure you want me here? I mean, with our track record and everything..."

"I don't care," Stiles says. His voice is weak and quiet and devoid of feeling. "I was alone when—" He cuts himself off, but Isaac has a pretty good idea of where the sentence was headed. Instead of continuing,

Stiles drops his head to Isaac's shoulder and says, "I can't do this alone."

Isaac wants to nod in acknowledgement, but he also doesn't want to dislodge Stiles, so he doesn't move. The physical affection is more obvious than what they usually share, but Isaac knows Stiles is usually holding himself back for his sake. Isaac has seen how Stiles is with Scott, sees how touch passes easy between them, sees how Stiles calms underneath it. So, Isaac doesn't dare move. He stays still and lets Stiles find solace on his shoulder.

—

Isaac thinks Stiles is asleep, but he can't be sure. His breathing has leveled and the anxiety in his scent has diluted, but that could just be the physical comfort doing its job. Either way, Isaac doesn't want to jar him awake or back into fear, so he doesn't check his eyes for wake or sleep.

Isaac makes himself a rock for Stiles to lean against. He closes his own eyes and dozes, but he doesn't actually sleep. He can't. He keeps seeing Scott's blood on his hands and feeling the lack of pulse beneath his skin.

Isaac makes himself a rock for Stiles, but, on the inside, he's frazzled. His nerves are fried. He's physically and emotionally exhausted, but he can't rest.

Isaac thinks he should be terrified. Part of him is, but the other part, the bigger part, is almost... giddy. Isaac never gave much thought to his romantic life. Before Scott, Isaac thought this was a part of life he would never get to experience. Sure, he had silly crushes here and there when he was a kid, but none like this. None like Scott.

As is true with just about everything, Scott is the beginning. Scott is the start of everything Isaac thought he would never get to have.

So, yes, part of Isaac is terrified. Scott is one of the most important people in Isaac's life. And, as the week leading up to the last few hours has shown, Isaac would be a mess without him. Part of Isaac is terrified that this will ruin everything, but the other part, the bigger part, is almost... happy.

Almost, because this isn't the time or place for happy. Almost, because, despite the circumstance, Isaac can't help but smile to himself.

He's terrified because this is so unknown and so much could go wrong, but he's happy because Scott is alive. Scott is alive and Isaac gets to explore this with him – even as one sided as it most definitely is.

And, of course, if Isaac's going to go and fall in love with someone, it's going to be with Scott. Because who else is there?

—

Melissa approaches a couple hours later – or, at least, Isaac assumes it's been a couple hours. There's no clock in his line of sight, so he can't know for sure without checking his phone, and he can't do that without waking Stiles.

Melissa crouches down in front of them, putting herself just below Stiles' eye level. Stiles makes a quiet, fitful noise. Isaac takes that to mean he's woken up, and shifts to sit up a little straighter. But then, Stiles doesn't lift his head. He slides down Isaac's arm in a position that can't be comfortable, but he doesn't readjust. Turns out, he's still asleep.

Isaac brings his free hand up to Stiles' hair, drumming a steady pattern. Melissa is watching him with a look of soft confusion, something nearly fond. She doesn't object to Isaac's tactics, just lets him wake Stiles gently.

Despite Isaac's best efforts, Stiles still comes to consciousness with a gasp. He's off Isaac's shoulder in an instant. And, when he sees Melissa, his chemosignals stretch thin with fear and anxiety. His eyes are already wet.

"He's okay," Melissa whispers, moving her hand like she's trying to tamp down Stiles' stress from the outside. "Dr. Geyer is stitching him up right now."

Stiles' mouth parts in shock and relief. He peers over Melissa's head, as if he's going to be able to see something significant. He's already halfway out of the chair too, saying, "Okay, I wanna see him."

"Okay, okay," Melissa says with an even hand on Stiles' shoulder, guiding him back into his seat. "The anesthesia needs to wear off, it's going to be at least two hours."

"Yeah, but everything's," Stiles breathes, sinking back into the chair, "gonna be okay, though? I mean," his voice is disjointed with

emotion, “he’s okay?”

“Mhm, he’s gonna be just fine,” Melissa says. She smiles in that understanding way of hers.

Stiles slumps back in his seat. All at once, the tension drains from his body. His next exhale shudders through him as tears spring to his eyes. The relief is everywhere. He runs a palm over his forehead, clasps his hands together in front of his chin, and releases, “Oh, thank god.”

Stiles goes to get himself a coffee and Isaac takes the opportunity to text Derek, saying: **Stilinski’s out of surgery. He’s going to be okay, but I’m gonna stay here with Stiles until he wakes up. You can head back to the loft, it’ll be a few more hours.**

Derek’s response comes quickly: **Are you sure? I don’t mind waiting.**

Isaac smiles, types: **Go home. I’m fine.**

He has to wait a little longer for the next reply. Derek’s typing bubble remains on display the entire time, like he’s writing a novel length message, though Isaac knows that’s not the case. Derek is thinking it over, trying to decide whether or not to believe Isaac. In the end, he does. His reply comes simple and to the point: **Ok fine, but call me if you need anything.**

Isaac sends a confirmation and Stiles returns with two paper cups. Isaac accepts the offered coffee, but he won’t drink it. He still has his tea.

Things are going so well. Until they aren’t.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” Stiles argues. And Isaac can tell he’s trying not to yell, but the fear is coming back and, this time, confusion comes with it. It’s not a good combination. “Two hours ago he was fine! Now, it looks like somebody took a baseball bat to his neck.”

“There could’ve been some minor internal,” Dr. Geyer tries to explain, but he’s not getting through to Stiles.

“Did you say ‘minor internal’? Since when is anything internal minor?” Stiles berates, impatient and incapable of politeness.

“Stiles...” Melissa says. Though, if it’s a warning or a comfort, Isaac doesn’t know.

“I need to know what’s wrong with him—”

That’s when Isaac stops listening.

There’s a heartbeat in the hallway, and it’s not from the EKG machine. It’s a new rhythm, a familiar rhythm. And there’s blood too. It smells fresh and strong and Isaac can see it all over his hands again.

Stiles moves past Isaac. He’s making for the door and Isaac knows he’s seen him. But, before Isaac can intervene, Stiles is slamming through the double doors and slamming into Scott.

(Scott, who died tonight. Scott, who Isaac hasn’t seen since Derek pulled him away from his claw torn body. Scott, who Isaac loves.)

Scott goes down hard. He shouldn’t, but maybe momentarily dying has weakened him. Either way, Stiles is pinning Scott to the ground, spitting his anger in words like, “Where were you? You trusted him. You believed him. Right, huh? So where were you?”

Stiles’ volume is rising right alongside his anger. It’s in that moment that Isaac realizes: Stiles doesn’t know. He doesn’t know what happened to Scott. He just knows that Scott is standing and breathing while his dad appears to be dying.

The anger isn’t surprising, but it is a little uncalled for and a lot freaking Isaac out. So, now, he intervenes. Isaac grabs Stiles around the shoulders and arms, pulling him off of Scott even as he yells, “Where the hell were you?”

“Stop, stop, stop it!” Melissa runs in with hospital security and Dr. Geyer on her heels. They get between the pair of brothers, helping Scott to his feet and *trying* to help Isaac contain Stiles. (Isaac doesn’t let them get anywhere close to Stiles. He doesn’t trust this hospital and he doesn’t trust anyone that isn’t pack right now.)

Stiles squirms against Isaac’s hold, like he still wants to break free, like he wants to land more than a verbal attack. Isaac squeezes a little tighter, just on the wrong side of too much. That gets Stiles’ attention. He pushes back against Isaac’s arms, but his heart is starting to level

and he's complaining, "Okay, all right, all right."

Isaac lets go, but he keeps his body angled just a tad in front of Stiles, just enough to block him if he lunges again. (Isaac doesn't actually think he will, but it's better to be safe.)

Stiles and Scott are breathing heavily, staring each other down with animosity and anger and fear.

"Look, your dad's not the only one that got hurt," Scott pants, only half meeting Stiles' eyes. He sounds strained and weaker still.

"Oh, you'll heal," Stiles scoffs with a pointed nod of his head.

The movement brings Isaac's attention to Scott's middle. His white shirt is stained with a splotch of red. The blood is fresh. It hasn't been long since the library, but it shouldn't still be fresh. Scott notices it too and, a little frantic, he pulls his jacket tighter over his stomach. It's like he's trying to hide it, like he knows something's wrong, something more than temporary post-death fragility. It scares Isaac more than he's willing to admit.

"I'm not talking about me." That gets everyone's attention. "I'm talking about Lydia."

—

Isaac expects to feel awkward or nervous or different.

Stiles all but instantly sprints downstairs to find Lydia, the doctors following close behind him. Isaac is worried about Lydia, but too many cooks in a kitchen and all that. So, he stays and so does Scott. They're alone together.

Isaac expects to feel awkward or nervous or different, but he doesn't. At least, not really.

Sure, everything has changed. But everything is the same too. It's still just Scott. It's still just safety and warmth and connection.

So, even as Isaac expects it to be strained and forced and glaringly obvious, it's just like always. (Except for the fact that Isaac can't stop thinking about it. That's the biggest difference. It's still just Scott, but, now? Now, Isaac *knows*.)

"What are you doing here?" Scott asks, though it's not accusatory. If

anything, he sounds almost grateful. “How did you know?”

“Your mom called me,” Isaac says with a shrug. And, a little sheepish, “Stiles was asking for me, I guess.”

“Oh,” Scott says. There’s a hint of hurt there, but Isaac knows it’s not his fault and knows Scott knows that too. “I – I’m glad he wasn’t alone.”

Even after Stiles has shoved him to the ground and shouted in his face, Scott doesn’t have any anger for him. (And it’s not that Scott doesn’t get angry. He does – of course he does, he’s human too. He’s just too understanding for his own good, knows too well that Stiles is crumbling and looking for an outlet for his pain. And Scott being their leader makes him an easy target.)

“He doesn’t know what happened,” Isaac says. Because it feels like an important distinction to make.

Scott shrugs. “I’m not sure it will make a difference.”

Isaac doesn’t like how hopeless Scott sounds right now. He doesn’t know how to fix it, so he just says, “Come on. We can sit while we wait. Stiles might be a while.”

He won’t be. More than likely, Stiles will be rushing and frantic. But, even if it’s only five minutes, it’s still time. Rest is rest and, right now, they need to take it wherever they can get it.

And so, Scott and Isaac find their way to the chairs once occupied by Stiles and Isaac. Scott sees the still full cup on the little side table and asks, “Is that coffee?”

Isaac hears the interest in his voice. He nods, “You can have it, if you want. It might be kind of cold though.”

“Yeah?” Scott asks.

“Yeah,” Isaac says, aiming for casual. “I don’t really like coffee to begin with, but then Stiles drinks his black and it’s just... yuck.”

“Thanks,” Scott smiles, reaching for the paper cup. He takes a sip and makes a happy sort of noise in the back of his throat. Isaac wants to bury his fingers in his ears and never hear that again. He wants to play it on loop and listen to nothing else.

Isaac doesn't do either of those things. Instead, not quite teasing, but close to it, he asks, "Good?"

Scott looks up at him. "The best."

He's more excited about lukewarm hospital coffee than should even be allowed. There's a glimmer of life in his eyes and a twitching smile at his lips. Isaac feels like he's going to pass out.

This is going to be so much harder than he thought.

Isaac is right. It doesn't take long for Stiles to rally the troops, just as rushed and frantic as expected. They – Isaac, Scott, Stiles, Melissa, and Parrish – gather in the morgue to discuss a plan of action.

"It could be a side effect of shock," Parrish suggests. He's still too new to this. He's still looking at things from a human angle, an optimistic outlook.

"She's catatonic," Stiles stresses. He's objective in the statement of, "It was Theo digging his way through her mind."

And there it is again: Theo exceeding Isaac's expectations, ruining lives and *destroying* their pack.

Isaac can't help but think of Corey. It stings, the memory of Scott's claws in the back of his neck. It stings, thinking that Theo was watching and learning. It stings, knowing that Scott is going to make that connection and pin all the blame on himself.

Isaac still isn't okay with what Scott did to Corey, but what happened to Lydia isn't his fault. It's Theo's. Just like everything else, this is all his fault. Isaac's blood is singing with scalding anger, fury, betrayal.

"Why would he do that?" Melissa asks, eyes darting around the group. "What is he looking for?"

Isaac grits his teeth against the emotion and breathes a little heavier than is necessary. Losing control isn't going to help anyone. He needs to stay level headed and anchored.

Like it's simple and clear, Scott says, "The same thing he's always looking for."

"An advantage," Isaac finishes.

Scott turns to look at Isaac. Their eyes meet and he nods his agreement. Isaac really wishes Scott wouldn't look at him like that.

"So what did he gain by trying to kill Stilinski?" Parrish asks.

"It left me alone with Liam," Scott answers, but he doesn't look at Parrish. He's still locked on Isaac. The reason for that quickly becomes clear. "Theo wanted to make sure that *nobody* would be there to stop him... from killing me."

It's forgiveness. It's Scott's subtle way of saying, *by the way, I don't blame you*. And, at that, Isaac has no choice but to tear his eyes away.

"Okay, so he gutted my dad as a distraction," Stiles says, voice breathy and filled with emotion, equal parts frustration and hurt. Then, he cuts his eyes towards Scott in a pointed move, like the truth of it is somehow Scott's fault.

Isaac really hates seeing them like this. It feels wrong in every way.

"We need to find this kid," Parrish urges. Now, he's thinking less like a human and more like a deputy.

"Isn't that a little dangerous? Especially since he almost killed *my* kid?" Melissa questions, fierce in her protectiveness.

Isaac sort of thinks she has a point. If Theo has disappeared, maybe they should let him. He's proven himself to be more than just dangerous. He's proven himself to be *deadly*.

"Yeah, but he said he didn't want my dad to die," Stiles counters. He's on the same page as Parrish, which would make sense. Stiles might not officially work in law enforcement, but he's been a detective for as long as Isaac has known him. It's in his blood. That – and their bias towards Stilinski and desperation to save him – makes Stiles and Parrish see the risks as necessary and worth it.

Skeptical and maybe even a little judging, Parrish asks, "And you believe him?"

Okay, so, maybe Stiles and Parrish aren't totally on the same side. But Isaac's not sure this conversation even has sides. It's too complicated, too many different priorities and perspectives. They're never going to get anything done like this.

"He told me where to find him," Stiles shrugs, "so, maybe he also

knows how to save him.”

“What do you want to do? Talk to him?” Melissa asks, monotone and full of disapproval.

Stiles takes the rhetorical question and runs with it, admitting, “If it saves my dad, then yeah.”

“I’ll come with you,” Scott says without hesitation. “He doesn’t know that I’m alive. Maybe that gives *us* an advantage.”

All things considered, Isaac doesn’t want *anyone* to talk to Theo right now, but *especially* not Scott.

“He’ll know you’re there,” Stiles disagrees. He turns, like he’s going to make the decision on his own, like he’s going to leave. “I just need to talk to him, not fight him.”

“Stiles,” Isaac’s voice comes out a little less sharp than he intended, more pleading, but it does the trick. Stiles stops at the door. He doesn’t pivot, but he looks over his shoulder. “You can’t go alone,” Isaac says. “Let me come with you.”

“If you come with me, then only one of you will make it out alive,” Stiles fires back, head shaking and looking at Isaac knowingly. It makes Isaac want to shrink in on himself. It makes him falter for just a moment too long, ruining his defense.

“Does anyone even know how to find him?” Parrish asks.

“We don’t have to find him,” Stiles says. “He’ll come to me.”

—

They come up with a plan. It’s terrible, but it’s not their worst. Probably.

It goes like this: Stiles will get in contact with Theo, asking him to meet at the McCall house. With Scott hiding upstairs and listening to his heartbeat, Stiles will talk to Theo. He’ll ask about his dad, he’ll get information, he’ll figure it out. Meanwhile, Isaac and Derek will be parked in the car down the street, just in case something bad happens.

It’s not a very good plan, but it’s all they’ve got. It’s decently safe and, hopefully, Isaac won’t have to actually see Theo. He’ll have to eventually, but not yet. Not today.

And so, Scott and Stiles get ready to leave while Isaac gets ready to wait for Derek to pick him up. He probably shouldn't, but he says goodbye to them. Well, he doesn't actually *say* goodbye, but he pulls them both aside before they can depart.

To Stiles, he says, "Be careful, okay? I know your whole thing is antagonizing people on purpose, but I – I'd rather not have another friend die today."

"It's gonna be fine," Stiles says. And, "Trust me."

Isaac doesn't understand how Stiles can have so much confidence. After all, he was the one who was so adamant in his initial disbelief of Theo. Still, Isaac does trust Stiles. He wants to believe that it's going to be fine, and, coming from Stiles, it's easy to agree.

To Scott, he says, "You have to be the rational one here, okay? Stay out of sight and don't do anything stupid."

"When have you ever known me to do anything stupid?" Scott asks. He's smiling that crooked jaw smile.

"Do you want that list alphabetized or ranked by level of stupidity?" Isaac says, expression tilting in a way that's more smirk than grin.

Scott laughs. Isaac wants to set himself on fire, make it the last sound he ever hears.

—

Derek's car is parked a few houses down from Scott's – not too close that Theo might spot them, but not too far that they can't see Theo's truck coming and going. It's parked in the driveway now, shining dark blue in the morning sun. Isaac's not sure how long it's been there, but he's growing impatient in the stiff silence of the stake out.

"Hey," Isaac says, just to say something. "You remember the last time we waited in a car like this?"

It takes Derek a moment to remember Argent and the supermarket parking lot and dumb questions, but Isaac sees it when the memory hits. Derek's eyes flit with recognition and then he's turning his head slow.

Derek fixes Isaac with the most deadpan, unamused expression he has ever seen.

“Sorry,” Isaac says. “Bad timing?”

“You’re ridiculous,” Derek says, but his blank face has broken into a slight grin. Isaac returns it tenfold.

Theo’s truck backs out of the driveway and peels off down the street. In an instant, Isaac is pressing out of his seat, reaching for the handle, and preparing to leap out of the car.

Click.

Derek locks the passenger side door. And then, his hand is on Isaac’s arm and he’s pulling him back into his seat. Isaac grumbles a growl in response.

“Cut the impulsive act for two minutes, Isaac,” Derek says, mostly ignoring the display of animalistic behavior. “Let’s think this through.”

“Think what through?” Isaac tries not to snap, but his nerves and impatience are ramping up.

“Shouldn’t we be following Theo?” Derek suggests.

“No,” Isaac says without thinking. He doesn’t want to follow Theo. He’s not ready to see him face to face. Even just that stupid swaggered walk towards the front door or the ducking of dark hair into his truck had almost been enough to set Isaac off. He doesn’t trust himself not to react. But, then, “I don’t know, *maybe*, but that’s not what we planned. We – We have to make sure they’re okay.”

“You mean make sure Scott is okay?” Derek asks.

Isaac bristles. He’s pretty sure his face is flushed with pink. “Just—” Isaac’s voice comes out as a squeak. He clears his throat. “Just drive.”

Derek laughs, but does as told. He turns the engine on and shifts gears, driving up the street to the end of the McCall house driveway. And, this time, when Isaac tries to jump out of the car, Derek lets him.

“—that matters right now is your dad,” Isaac hears the tail end of Scott’s sentence as he runs up to join him. Scott is standing in front of the borrowed car with Stiles at the wheel. He shoots Isaac a quick glance, but doesn’t allow himself to get distracted. He keeps going,

saying, “Come on, Stiles. We’ve survived an alpha pack, a dark druid, professional assassins. We can survive Dread Doctors and chimeras too.”

Isaac tries not to smile at the speech. Instead, he looks to Stiles, watching for his reaction. His eyes drop away from Scott, flitting in minute movements of thought.

“We’re not looking for a chimera,” Stiles says, eyes lifting. “We’re looking for a missing teenager.”

Isaac and Scott nod in sync as the words sink in. Finding genetic chimeras proved to be more difficult than they would have expected, but finding a missing teenager... that might be plausible. That might work.

Isaac turns his head to look for Derek. He’s standing a few feet behind them, not awkward, just waiting. Scott follows Isaac’s gaze, and, as he looks at Derek, something seems to click in Scott’s mind.

“Uh, go sit in the car with Stiles so he doesn’t drive off without me?” Scott says to Isaac, volume dipped and only a little bit frazzled in urgency and whatever idea he has building.

Isaac blinks. “You’re... You’re standing in the middle of the driveway.”

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t put running me over past him right now,” Scott says, gloomy words funnier than they have any need to be.

“Right,” Isaac says. He can’t help but remember Stiles plowing through the kanima. It pulls a soft laugh, “Yeah, okay, fair.”

Scott gives a weak smile, and then they separate. Scott heads down the driveway to talk to Derek and Isaac turns to the borrowed car (it’s Parrish’s – Isaac recognizes it from September 21st). On reflex or habit, Isaac opens the back door and makes to climb inside.

“No!” Stiles says immediately, stern and unnecessarily loud. “Sit up front. Scott’s riding in the back.”

Isaac rolls his eyes. This bickering is going to get very old, very fast.

—

From there, things move pretty quickly. They go to Stiles’ house

where they start looking for a missing teenager. They discover a call about a sophomore who never came home last night. His name is Noah Patrick. And he's on the genetic chimera list.

His name brings them to the school.

"Now we can catch his scent," Scott says, breaking into Noah's locker and retrieving a hoodie. He holds it up, but he doesn't breathe it in or pass it over to Isaac. Instead, he throws it behind him.

Malia catches the fabric with ease.

"You called her?" Stiles asks, though it's barely a question. His expression drops in his irritation and it only takes a handful of seconds for Isaac to realize he doesn't remember the last time he saw Malia and Stiles together, not just in the same room, but actually talking. *Could it really have been the night they read the book?*

"We need all the help we can get," Scott says. He's barely making eye contact, like he knew exactly what kind of reaction this would bring, but couldn't, in good faith, not make the call. Maybe that's why he didn't tell Isaac, maybe he's trying to protect him from Stiles' wrath, maybe he's trying to make sure there's still one person Stiles will turn to. "I should be calling everyone."

"And I know what this kid looks like," Malia says with a shrug. She's not trying to appeal to Stiles' emotions or make this mean more than it has to. She's here to help save Stilinski simply because she can.

Stiles still looks annoyed, but he doesn't argue and the four of them leave the school together.

—

They follow Noah's scent into the railway depot. Tension hangs heavy over the group. The easiness that Isaac associates with pack isn't present. This is far from easy. This is uncomfortable and strained and it's terrifying. What Theo did, twisting his way into their heads and squirming into minute cracks, it's still affecting them. The fractures still haven't healed. They're still not through the worst of it.

Isaac feels caught between Scott and Stiles more intensely than ever before. As it stands, Isaac seems to be the only person Stiles will tolerate. It should be a good thing. It should offer Isaac a way in. It should offer hope for repair, but it doesn't. All it really offers is guilt.

For now, Isaac pushes his internal conflict aside. For now, he hangs back with Stiles while Scott and Malia talk up ahead. For now, Isaac sticks close to Stiles, but, all the while, he can't stop thinking about Scott. Even when so much is at stake, Isaac can't stop thinking about that stupid epiphany. It lingers at the back of his mind, whispering with every step and flaring with every glance Scott makes in his direction.

How is Isaac supposed to be a good and objective friend when he's now inherently biased towards Scott? How is he supposed to give Stiles unconditional support when his heart is tugging him sideways?

"Okay. What's wrong with you?" Stiles asks. He stops in his walking, turning to stare at Isaac.

"What? Nothing," Isaac says, and he knows it's too quick and too obvious, but the words fly out of his mouth before he can stop them.

Stiles lowers his brows. "Seriously? I know we're all off today, but you're acting especially weird. There's something different. So... what is it?"

"You're the weird one," Isaac grumbles. Then, with all the emotional maturity he can muster, Isaac turns on his heel and marches away. The gravel crunches under his shoes as he practically stomps in line with Scott and Malia.

Behind him, Stiles laughs.

It's not one of his biggest laughs, but it's more than Isaac has heard recently, more than those weak huffs of air or light chuckles. It's real laughter and, even if it's at his own expense, Isaac smiles.

He's not the only one. To Isaac's left, a heart skips and, when Isaac turns in worry, he sees Scott's eyes flicking between him and Stiles. He sees Scott smiling, small but bright as ever.

(Isaac's pretty sure his heart skips too.)

"Hey," Malia calls for their attention. She ducks through a low opening in the depot and the others follow her. There, the space gives way to an expanse of dark tunnels and damp air. "I got it," Malia says. "I got his scent."

There's blood smeared along one of the pipes lining the walls. Malia dips her fingers in the puddle and they come back wet with it. Isaac blinks away visions of palms coated in viscous, staining red. He sees Stiles doing the same.

"This is Noah's," Malia says. "He was here. I think he's close."

Scott edges further ahead, up to the next fork in the tunnels.

"Guys," he says. "I think we've been down tunnels like this before, like when we were looking for Liam and Hayden."

Stiles rushes to stand at Scott's side, getting a good view of whatever Scott's looking at. Isaac peeks over their shoulders. It's nothing special, just another long line of dark gray and pipes.

"Okay, so what?" Stiles asks.

"Maybe it means we're closer than we think," Scott says, staring intensely at the turn at the end of the hall, the faint glow of light leading to somewhere unknown. "Maybe there's something else down here," he looks at Stiles, "something we haven't found yet."

"Yeah, nothing that helps my dad," Stiles bites. "Look, we can't just be *standing* around here *waiting* for something to—"

A figure lunges out of the shadows, cutting off Stiles' rant and knocking him back. The creature growls with snarled teeth as Stiles hits the wall hard, head banging back against stone. Stiles' eyes fall closed and his body goes still.

"Stiles!" Isaac calls, but he's already gone. Stiles is blacked out and unconscious.

Malia works to contain the rogue chimera while Scott shoves past Isaac to get to Stiles. It's a little harsher than is really necessary, but Isaac can't fault Scott for it. Isaac is frozen in place, giving no help at all. He knows the impact isn't enough to really hurt Stiles, but his brain is treacherous and cruel, flashing with images of Derek and Scott, Allison and Boyd.

Isaac doesn't move, but Scott is holding Stiles' hand, saying his name in a soft and gentle voice. It can't be more than fifteen seconds before Stiles' eyes open again. He blinks in quick succession, eyes frantic, like he doesn't quite know where he is, like he's looking for something that isn't there. Then, his gaze falls on Scott and his heart steadies and his

breathing levels out. With Scott's help, Stiles rises to his feet.

"You okay?" Scott asks, voice urgent with nervous confusion.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Stiles says, back to that withdrawn place, that isolated numbness.

Malia's growl pulls them out of the emotional limbo and into the present situation. She has Noah pinned to the ground underneath her. She's poised to attack, but she's not actively hurting him, just constraining him while he begs, "Let me go, please. *Please*. They're coming."

Just then, there's a distinct crackle and thrum. Like the grinding whir of gears working together, the sound comes from deep within the tunnels. It's already growing louder. The Dread Doctors are approaching.

Isaac doesn't see the moment Malia lets Noah go – he has his back to her, watching the narrow hall of darkness – but he sees when Stiles grabs him. Stiles shoves Noah against one of the walls, a similar kind of darkness in his voice when he says, "You're not going anywhere."

"I said I don't remember," Noah fights, struggling against Stiles' hold and fighting for escape.

"You don't remember anything?" Stiles asks, pushing harder and *mean* in his desperate disbelief.

"No," Noah repeats. He's scared. Isaac can tell, not just by his scent, but by the look in his eyes. He's just as desperate as Stiles, though the motivations are different. "Not when it happens. Not when I change."

"You clawed my dad half to death, okay? And now it's poisoning him, so you're going to start remembering every detail right now," Stiles says. Isaac has to admit he's a little impressed by his strength. Noah is squirming and writhing, but Stiles isn't letting up. Isaac also kind of thinks someone should intervene, but, then again, doing so would no doubt lead to Sheriff Stilinski's demise and they can't let that happen.

"Scott, I hear them," Malia presses.

Isaac refocuses his attention. He puts his trust in Stiles' ability to restrain Noah and himself, and turns his back on them. He turns to face the long dark hallway and he listens. The clinking sound is gaining volume. They're running out of time.

“Yeah, me too,” Scott says. Then, louder, “Hey, Stiles, get him out of here. Go to the hospital,” And, yelling now, “Figure out a way to save your dad.”

“We’re not going to be able to stop them,” Malia says.

And that much is obvious. This isn’t about defeating the Dread Doctors. This isn’t even about survival. This is about Stiles and Stilinski and the guilt Scott is feeling.

“Yeah, but we can slow them down,” Scott says.

He’s probably right. They can buy Stiles time. Hopefully, that will be all he needs.

“Stiles, go,” Scott says again.

Stiles stares back at him. Silent communication passes between them. It’s not forgiveness and it’s not understanding, but it’s the knowledge that whatever’s going on between them doesn’t change the affection they hold for each other. It’s not healing, but it’s some sort of progress, some sort of temporary reprieve. Scott nods, and it’s enough. Stiles grabs Noah and runs.

Hopefully, with time, Stiles will be able to save his dad. Then, maybe, he’ll come back and save them.

Because Scott is still bleeding, the Dread Doctors have turned the corner, and, “We’re going to die down here.”

“No, we’re not,” Scott says. He’s perfectly calm. There’s no trace of panic or worry. He’s solidified and certain.

“How can you be so sure?” Malia asks. She’s twitchy, weight tipping forward and back, like she still wants to run away, but won’t.

Even as the Dread Doctors cover more ground, Scott doesn’t waver in his confidence. Just says, “Because you’re not the only one that I called.”

“Get down!” a familiar voice echoes behind them.

Isaac spares a quick, split second glance. He gets one good glimpse of Argent and Derek stepping out of the shadows with guns held high. Then, Isaac ducks. He slides into one of the branches coming off the main tunnel, following after Scott and out of the line of fire. They

crouch to the ground and watch as the rain of bullets begins.

Argent and Derek advance toward the Dread Doctors with practiced and determined aim. Their bullets bounce right off the waves of frequency, but they aren't deterred. They keep moving forward until they've passed Isaac, Scott, and Malia's tenuous hideout.

"Run!" Argent orders.

And they do. The three of them jump up, slipping by Argent and Derek, sheltered by their bullets. They back away on quick feet, rounding the next corner. There's a fleeting grab of Scott's hand circling Isaac's wrist, tugging him fast and turning him forward. Then, he lets go and they run together. They don't look back, though they can hear the steady approach of the Dread Doctors and the constant firing of bullets.

Argent and Derek don't stop shooting, but they do switch directions. They retreat towards the exit of the tunnels. This isn't a battle. This is a rescue mission, and, with the cover of bullets, it's going to be a success. The exit is growing closer and the light is shining through.

Safety is in sight, but they don't slow down. They keep sprinting with everything they have left in the tank. They don't slow down until the floor beneath their feet changes from stone to gravel. They don't slow down until the scent shifts from something damp to something fresh. They don't slow down until the whirl of the Dread Doctors turns to silence.

Then, they crash to a stop. Or, well, Scott does. He staggers to the ground, clutching his chest and falling onto his back. And that brings Isaac to his knees, crashing alongside him, not by necessity, but by the tether of their hearts.

The blood is less noticeable against the blue of the shirt Scott changed into earlier, but Isaac doesn't need the stain. He can smell the coppery thickness and taste the metal at the back of his throat.

"Scott?" Isaac whispers. His hands are hovering above his own knees, too hesitant to touch. He doesn't want to go through this again. He doesn't want blood painted hands.

"I'm – I'm fine," Scott stammers, breathless. "We have to... get to the hospital."

Isaac opens his mouth to protest, but then Scott starts struggling to

press himself into a seated position, one hand on the ground and one still covering his wound. Now, Isaac pushes past his discomfort and reaches out. He reaches out with a steady hand on Scott's arm, just over where his tattoo lies.

Isaac inhales. He breathes in Scott's pain. It twists in his veins. It's sharp and aching, but so worth it for the regulating of Scott's heart, for the shaky relief of his next exhale.

Isaac readjusts, shifting to start helping Scott up. That's when Derek approaches. His gun hangs from one hand, but, with the other, he gets a grip on Scott. Together, Isaac and Derek move him to his feet. Isaac wraps his arm around Scott's middle, a closeness that he's far too conscious of, but that can't be avoided.

Once Scott is balanced, Isaac really could let go. Scott is still injured, but Isaac has just taken his pain and he's breathing normally. Isaac really could let go, but he doesn't. He stays tucked into Scott's side through the entire walk to the parking lot. He stays stuck to Scott and forces himself not to think about it.

They find Argent's car, but Parrish's is already gone. Which means, Stiles made it out. Which means, they gave him time.

The question remains: *was it enough?*

—

Turns out, it was. They rush to the hospital and rush through the glass doors. Melissa is waiting for them at the entrance, giving the verdict in a happy smile and a slow nod. Stilinski is okay.

Melissa explains it all – Noah being part berserker, the piece of bone marrow, the surgery to remove it. She explains that, "He's got a bit of recovery ahead of him, but he's going to be okay." And, "Stiles is with him now. I think they might be sleeping."

It's such good news Isaac could cry.

"What about Lydia? How is she doing?" Scott asks.

Melissa gives the verdict in a sad frown and a slow shake of her head. Lydia's not okay.

Melissa explains that too – Natalie Martin's protective streak, the lack of improvement, the convincing doctors. She explains that, "Lydia's

been taken to Eichen House.” And, “They didn’t say for how long. I’m sorry.”

It’s such bad news Isaac could cry.

Isaac stares at the ceiling of his bedroom. He’s exhausted, but his mind is still reeling with the day’s events. He’s thinking about Scott, mostly. He keeps trying to pinpoint the exact moment when his feelings shifted, but it’s impossible to tell. Isaac’s not sure there was just *one* moment. Isaac thinks it was a multitude of things, a build up of every exchange, a slow evolution.

Isaac wonders when he would’ve realized without the push of death. He knows he would’ve figured it out eventually, but how long is eventually?

Now that he knows, it’s so glaringly obvious. It’s like staring directly into the sun. There’s no denying it. And, even if he tries to look away, the after images remain as an unshakable reminder.

Scott. The first person who ever showed him unconditional kindness. The first person who Isaac ever truly trusted. The bright smile, the warm eyes, the comfort of connection. The—

The person who’s calling Isaac right now.

“Hey, Isaac. I’m glad you answered.”

It’s their first phone call since before Liam and Hayden were taken. It feels like coming home.

They don’t talk about anything serious yet, but the phone call is like a promise. It’s a promise to fix things between them. It’s a promise to reunite them.

It’s a promise.

Chapter End Notes

P.S. I wrote the first kiss yesterday

Damnatio Memoriae

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 12

Word count: 7,433

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The screen is pixelated and the lighting is poor, but there's no mistaking the sheer size of the creature. It runs on all fours through the door of the communications tower, huge and inky black and unnatural.

"That looked big," Scott says, eyes wide and slowly lowering Parrish's phone.

"And too fast for anyone to get a good look at it," Parrish confirms. Then, "But you already know what it is, don't you?"

Scott looks over his shoulder, staring intensely at the same open doorway. Here and now, it's in sharp image with the sun high in the sky. There's no creature to be seen, but there's police tape and evidence of something bad.

Something like, "The last chimera."

—

Inside the communications tower, the damage is extensive. Torn electrical wires flicker with sparks, equipment is strewn left and right, and, worst of all, there's a pool of blood.

Scott kneels beside the puddle of swirling crimson. He holds out a slightly trembling hand, but doesn't touch. Instead, he turns to Parrish and asks, "You still got a blacklight?"

Parrish reaches into his pocket, retrieving a small light. Scott clicks it on, shining the faintly purple glow over the smear of blood. Black smoke billows in the air.

Black smoke means mercury. And, "Mercury means chimera."

Scott turns the flashlight off and moves to his feet. He walks in quick paces, shoulders squared back and searching for any clues. Other than the surface level damage, there isn't much to be discovered, but, still, Isaac follows Scott's lead.

"What was it doing here?" Parrish asks, trailing after them. "Why come here and kill some random communications tech?"

"Maybe it just likes to kill," Scott says grimly. "Maybe it's what it does."

They've had this dilemma before. This pondering of which is worse – an evil with motive or without? Isaac's not sure it matters anymore. In the end, there's always some crux of why, there's never truly been *no* motive.

"That's... terrifying," Parrish sums up astutely.

"Parrish," Scott says, a certain urgency to his voice now, "how many bodies do you actually see when you dream about the nemeton?"

Parrish's eyes dart all around. They flick between Scott and Isaac. They drop down, to the claw marks ripped through a metal cabinet and the whirl of blood and mercury. They look up again.

"Everyone."

Great. That's just great.

—

Isaac really tries not to think about how close he is to Scott. Riding on the back of Scott's motorbike, there's nowhere to hide. There's no escaping the press of chest to back or the looping of arms around waist. There's nothing Isaac can do but hold on and squeeze his eyes shut. And secretly hope that they crash and burn. Or end up in a traffic jam.

Unfortunately for Isaac, neither one happens. They arrive at the McCall house within minutes. Stepping inside, Isaac thinks the torture is over. That is, until Scott leads him up the stairs to his bedroom.

Isaac has been here so many times before. It's easy to fall back into that feeling of comfort and familiarity, but, still, at the back of his mind, there's a teasing of something changed. There's a different connotation to this now, to this being in Scott McCall's bedroom.

Isaac buries the feelings as far as down as they can go. Then, he leans back in Scott's bed and watches his poor attempts at a crime board. Newspaper clippings, pictures of chimeras, the map of Beacon Hills – all are messily connected in knotted and twisted red string.

Oh, and Scott's connected too.

Somehow, he's managed to get the string looped around the button of his jacket cuff. And, when he tugs it free, the evidence comes down with it. Scott's eyes squint closed and he tips his head back with a defeated sigh, peeking one eye open to sneak a look at the damage. That pulls a louder groan.

Isaac tries to smother his laughter into the corner of Scott's pillow, but it doesn't really work. All it brings is a breath full of Scott's scent. And that really shouldn't be allowed. *Stupid werewolf senses.*

"Shut up," Scott grumbles, glaring at Isaac and trying to collect the pieces splayed across the floor.

Isaac could get up to help, but he doesn't. Just says, "We can't do this by ourselves."

Scott drops the evidence. He lets it fall back to the floor. He gives another sad noise. Quietly, he says, "Yeah. I know."

Isaac doesn't respond, just waits as Scott pushes to his feet and moves to sit on the bed. He has his back turned to Isaac, elbows rested on knees and hands clasped together. Isaac can see the curve of his neck as his head ducks low. His chemosignals are just as messy as the crime board, discombobulated and unsure.

Isaac still doesn't say anything. He's not sure what to say. He could press the issue, make it even more obvious that the help they need is Stiles', but he doesn't. Scott already knows. So, Isaac waits.

After at least two minutes of silence, Scott sits up a little straighter, looking back at Isaac. "You knew, didn't you?"

Scott doesn't clarify and Isaac doesn't ask him to. He doesn't have to. He knows exactly what Scott's referring to. And he knew this conversation was coming. He knew Scott had found out and knew they had to talk about it, but that doesn't mean he's looking forward to it.

Isaac nods and says, "Yeah. I did."

Scott readjusts, shifting so he's sitting more parallel to Isaac, body language open, but not a direct focus. It takes some of the pressure off.

"When did he tell you?" Scott asks.

"Um," Isaac swallows. "The night at the hospital. When Liam and Hayden were missing."

Isaac glances at Scott out of the corner of his eyes, just enough to see the glint of recognition. Isaac wonders if Scott's thinking about the unanswered call.

"And... that's why you pulled away?" There's zero animosity in his tone. It's only a sad sort of curiosity, like a question of, *what did I do wrong?*

"Partly," Isaac says. And he knew he was going to have to have this conversation too. Maybe it's best to do it all at once. Get it over with, lay it all out on the table. Then, they can begin the process of patching the cracks.

Scott turns to look at him. His eyebrows are furrowed in a quiet confusion. "What does that mean?"

Isaac clears his throat. "Remember when we read the book? And I had my memory on the stairs?"

Scott nods, but doesn't say anything. He's still looking at Isaac with those twisted brows, but his eyes are melting, a chocolate warmth of understanding and compassion. It makes Isaac's heart beat a little faster. Hopefully, Scott will blame it on the nerves.

"I'm sure you've guessed that my dad was a part of it, but, more importantly, I, uh, I remembered something about my mom. She—" Isaac exhales. This never gets any easier to say. Isaac thinks it might be getting harder. "She didn't die. She left us."

The confusion in Scott doesn't fade. If anything, it grows. But, now, shock joins the mix. The scents and expressions blend together in a mixture that almost feels like pity.

"I don't know why I didn't tell you," Isaac admits. "I guess I didn't want to tell anyone. I didn't want it to be real."

And I couldn't stomach your kindness.

“Isaac, I... I don’t know what to say,” Scott whispers.

Isaac shrugs. He matches Scott’s volume with, “You don’t have to say anything.”

Scott shakes his head and readjusts. He spins towards Isaac, legs pulled under him and watching Isaac’s profile with such warm intensity. Isaac doesn’t turn with him. He can’t handle it, can’t handle the care at such close range. He can’t.

“How old were you?” Scott asks. He doesn’t seem to mind the way Isaac refuses to look at him.

“It was my sixth birthday,” Isaac says. He’s still whispering. It feels easier that way, less brash and cold. It feels like a secret, like something private and unobserved.

Scott releases a quiet noise of sympathy. “Do you remember much about her?”

It’s not the question Isaac is expecting. He nearly chokes on it. For a moment, he feels like he can’t breathe, wants to ask Scott for his inhaler. Then, just as quickly, Scott’s hand is on his shoulder and he levels out again.

Scott doesn’t move his hand. Isaac can’t decide if he wants him to or not.

(He doesn’t. He wants Scott to never let go. He wants to be close to him always. He wants to make himself small and curl up in Scott’s heart, in the empty space of his ribs. He wants so badly that it physically hurts.)

“I remember holding her hand,” Isaac says. “Her skin was so soft and she always had her nails painted. I... I remember how her hand felt so safe, like it was covering mine, protecting me.”

“Are you angry?” Scott asks.

Again, it’s not the expected question. Though, honestly, Isaac’s not sure he has any expectations anymore.

“No,” Isaac says. “Not – Not really.” Then, “Why? Should I be angry?”

“No,” Scott echoes. “No, anger is... it’s easy, but it’s *corrosive*. I’ll never have a perfect relationship with my dad. Hell, I don’t know if I’ll

ever even have a *good* relationship with him. But... when I made the switch, when I stopped being angry, it felt good. It – It was his choice, you know? We can't make people do anything, so whatever happens in the future, that's on him. I guess. Does that make any sense?"

Isaac finally turns to look at Scott. He smiles at him, something bright and amused, if a little pathetically sad.

"What?" Scott asks.

"Your mom said almost the same exact thing," Isaac says.

"You – You talked to my mom about this?" Scott questions. He's still not mad or hurt. If anything, now *he* looks amused.

"Not on purpose," Isaac says. It sounds a little too defensive, so he takes a breath. Then, continues, at a normal pace, "I went on a drive to clear my head and ended up here. Your mom was home and... it all just came out."

Scott smiles too. "Yeah, she has that effect on people. I swear, I don't know how I kept the supernatural secret for as long as I did."

Isaac releases a small laugh. "Well, she – she helped a lot. Made me realize that it doesn't really have to change much."

Scott's head tilts. "What do you mean?"

"I... I have no intention of seeing my mom again," Isaac says. His voice dips quiet again, a flash of guilt. (He tries to make sense of the feeling – maybe it's spurred by the amount of friends he has with mothers who actually died, or maybe it just feels unnecessarily cruel to his own.) "And I don't remember her well enough for this to really change my perception of her."

Scott hums. "You really have no interest in trying to find her?"

"A year and half ago, I would've said yes without a doubt, but, now?" Isaac sighs. "Now, I don't know. I just don't think I need to pin my hopes on a person who willingly walked out on me."

"And on your birthday no less," Scott says.

It takes Isaac a second too long to catch the smidge of humor in his words and in his eyes. It's just that... Scott isn't usually the type to make jokes at a time like this (that's more Stiles' forte). Usually, he's

overly cautious and careful. Usually, he's a little too serious and a little too nice.

Usually, but not right now. Right now, Scott is grinning something small and almost proud – of himself, Isaac is almost hundred percent sure. Though, that doesn't stop his stomach from fluttering.

Scott's joy has always been highly contagious. Isaac has no immunity against it (that makes a lot more sense now). So, he laughs a little, and says, "Yeah. On my birthday."

Scott's smile falters. It's a tiny twitch, like maybe he's just heard how sad it actually sounds. He looks like maybe he wants to double back and course correct, but he doesn't. He knows Isaac well enough by now to know that the emotional whiplash won't be appreciated. Instead, he goes quiet.

Isaac goes with him.

They're still sitting in Scott's bed, still too close for Isaac to fully relax, still close enough that Isaac can hear every beat of Scott's heart.

It takes him right back to that night. Only a few days ago. Only two heartbeats instead of three.

"I'm sorry," Isaac blurts. It's a breath of air, a muted whisper of something he's too scared to face.

Scott's still looking at him, but Isaac has turned away again. He stares at the undone chain lock of Scott's door. He imagines he can hear it rattling, but, really, he shouldn't go there.

"What are you sorry for?" Scott asks.

Isaac looks down at his hands. He imagines he can see the blood stains, but, really, he shouldn't go there either.

Isaac's hands start rubbing together. He hardly even realizes until Scott's hand slides over his own. Their hands aren't clasped and their fingers aren't intertwined. It's just Scott's hand covering Isaac's. Protecting him.

"Iz?"

"I always knew you were going to trust Theo," Isaac says. The words trip and stumble out of his mouth, too quick to second guess them.

“We – We’re supposed to look out for each other. I should’ve been watching your back. I shouldn’t... I shouldn’t have stopped being suspicious and I shouldn’t have let myself get pulled away.” Isaac bites the inside of his cheek hard enough to sting. “If anyone should’ve been prepared to handle this, it was me.” He glances at Scott. “Right?”

Scott is frowning. “Isaac. We *all* trusted Theo.”

Isaac shakes his head. Wants to say, *it’s different*, but doesn’t know how to explain why it’s true.

“He... He used Camden to get to you,” Scott says. (It hurts, it hurts, it hurts.) “You – You can’t blame yourself for that.”

Isaac continues to shake his head. Says, “But I had it right and I did nothing.”

“That’s not true,” Scott says. His tone is building now, gaining strength, but not anger. Conviction. “You told me your opinion and I didn’t listen.”

“I told you once and never brought it up again,” Isaac counters. He doesn’t know why this matters so much, but he needs it to be heard. “That doesn’t really count for anything.”

Scott sighs. “Is this really what we’re going to do? Are we really going to sit here, blaming ourselves back and forth?”

Isaac shrugs. “Not the worst way to spend an afternoon.”

That makes Scott laugh, brighter and more exuberant than is really appropriate. It makes Isaac smirk with a smug sort of satisfaction.

Then, “What’s done is done,” Scott says. “We can’t go back and change it. All we can do now is reassess, you know? Figure out how to make sure something like this doesn’t happen again.”

“And how do we do that?” Isaac asks.

“Well... you have to start sharing your opinion,” Scott says. “And for real this time.” Isaac’s face twists, nose scrunching in near disgust. Scott’s lip twitches, but he doesn’t smile, just says, “I’m serious. You have a unique and valuable perspective. You need to share that. We – I *want* you to share that.”

Scott’s being truthful. Isaac can hear it in the steady beat of his heart,

though he hardly needs the confirmation. Scott doesn't often lie, and he wouldn't lie to Isaac, especially not about this. His compassion and interest is genuine, but, still, "That's easier said than done."

Isaac doesn't want to be difficult. He wants to be able to disagree and speak his mind. But it's hard. His past won't allow it. Silence and compliance have been trained – *beaten* – into him. Those things don't just go away, kind words only heal so much.

"Does it make it easier when I directly ask you what you think?" Scott questions. He's still being so tolerant and considerate. It's making Isaac's head spin.

"Um. Yeah," Isaac says. "Yeah, I think so."

"Okay, so... how about this: I promise to ask for your opinion whenever I remember and you promise to try to share even when I forget?" Scott suggests.

Isaac pauses, thinking it over. It's not unreasonable and it's not unrealistic. It's a promise they can both make. It's a promise that, "I'll try."

"Then I will too," Scott says, smiling with his eyes.

He's just looking at Isaac, it's nothing more than eye contact, but it's too much. Isaac has to blink and pull away.

—

After that, Isaac doesn't stay at the McCall house for much longer. They make a tentative plan: Scott will try to recruit some help and Isaac will go back to the loft to do some research on the strange creature.

That's where Isaac is now, unlocking the security system and coming home. He finds Derek looking like he was almost halfway out the door.

"Oh," he says, sounding a little surprised. "Hey, Isaac. I thought you were with Scott?"

"I was," Isaac says. He's frowning in confusion, but ignores the cagey reaction in order to explain the situation. "Scott wanted me to do some research. There – There was a sighting of the last chimera. It's not like the others. It's full animal, or, like, monster. It's black and

huge and has these glowing eyes that are almost purple.”

Derek’s eyebrows fall. “Huh.”

“What?”

“Nothing, it just... it sounds kind of familiar,” Derek says. Then, changing the subject a little too quickly for Isaac’s liking, “I have to run. I’ll help later.”

Isaac’s eyes narrow. “Where are you going?”

“I’m helping Braeden with something,” Derek says. He doesn’t give any elaboration, nothing more than, “I’ve been sworn to secrecy.”

Isaac’s glare deepens. “We aren’t supposed to keep secrets from each other.”

Derek lifts a near-accusatory eyebrow. “Yeah? Okay. You tell me what changed the night of the supermoon, and I’ll tell you where I’m going.”

Isaac visibly freezes. His hackles rise and he’s powerless to protest. Whatever Derek knows, whatever he’s picked up on, Isaac isn’t ready to confirm it. He isn’t ready to do more than deflect. So, he just says, “Fine. Be safe.”

Isaac settles into research, splaying books and notes across his bed and floor. He enjoys it more than he probably should, finding many interesting stories and legends, but nothing that fits the description of the creature. Nothing inky black, nothing with purple eyes, nothing that kills without motive.

The creature tugs at a memory in Isaac. Over and over, through each failed book, Isaac keeps reliving the surveillance footage. Just like Derek, he can’t shake the feeling that there’s something familiar about it. He’s seen it before – he *knows* he has – he just doesn’t remember where.

Still, Isaac perseveres. He stumbles into another one of Laura’s books. This one, about phases of the moon and their effect on different supernatural creatures.

Isaac shouldn’t stop here. He knows none of this is relevant, but he

can't help but torture himself – just a little. He flips the pages in haste, past new moons and wanings and waxings, through to less common sightings.

A lunar eclipse occurs when earth is positioned between the sun and moon. During a lunar eclipse, the only sunlight reaching the moon is that which has passed through earth's atmosphere. This weakens the full moon. When this happens, werewolves lose their power.

Isaac's next breath shakes in his lungs. He flips further ahead, searching for something specific, searching for–

A supermoon (also referred to as a perigee-syzygy) is a full or new moon that coincides with perigee – the period in the moon's orbit when it is closest to the earth. During a supermoon, a werewolf's powers will be amplified.

Isaac closes his eyes.

He misses them. He misses them so much. He misses them more than he ever allows himself to feel.

Erica and Boyd were Isaac's first experience of pack. It was different from Scott's pack. It was less – Isaac feels okay admitting that now. He feels okay being honest with himself, he feels okay accepting that they never got to be the pack they were supposed to be. They never lived up to that potential. They never trusted each other completely.

It was different and less, but it was still pack. And losing them, losing that connection, it doesn't go away. Even with the forging of new bonds, there's still that ache. It's a darkness in Isaac, one that flares at the full moon and dilutes at the new. It's the constant feeling of a tugging memory, a tip of the tongue sensation, something just out of reach.

Isaac misses them.

He missed Boyd. His sensibility and his calm. Isaac always knew what he was going to get with Boyd. It was always so simple and certain. He was predictable and even.

He misses Erica. Her brash humor and her sharp smiles. She was Isaac's only friend from before. The only person who knew who Isaac was without power. The only person persistent enough to break down his walls.

Isaac wishes he could talk to her. To say goodbye, maybe. But, also, to ask for her help and her clarity. Erica was always so confident and sure. She was objective and steady. Isaac can see her in his mind, can hear the way she would smile at him and say, “*what’s your damage?*”

Isaac imagines telling her about Scott. He imagines the way she would laugh. Not at him and not with him. Just laughter. And it would make Isaac smile too. It would make it seem less scary.

That’s what it meant for them to be pack. To go through it together, to get the bite in such quick succession... it made it not so intimidating. It made everything feel okay. It made Isaac feel strong. Stronger than ever, stronger than even the full moon in perigee.

It was their memory that gave Isaac the *power* to break out. That memory – *their* memory – is stronger than anything. It’s stronger than any pain or fear that Isaac could face. It’s strong enough to save him.

They saved him. Erica and Boyd and pack. It was all them. Their strength is his strength. Isaac is strong because of them. Isaac is *alive* because of them.

They saved his life.

And, suddenly, that tip of the tongue feeling doesn’t seem so nagging anymore. It’s no longer a reminder of something dark and twisted. It’s no longer a reminder of loss. It’s a lingering connection. It feels like never being alone. It feels like Isaac will never truly be alone again because he has experienced pack. And that doesn’t go away. It will never leave him. *They* will never leave him.

Isaac will never know what they would think of the person he’s become. He’ll never get to see them again. He’ll never get to talk to them. But he’ll never be alone. Erica and Boyd are with him. They’re protecting him. They’re looking out for him. They’re embedded in his bones, they’re scarred in Isaac’s skin.

They’re pack. And they always will be.

—

The sun sinks quicker than Isaac can keep up with. He finds himself in the dark with night vision guiding the turn of each page. He’s still getting nowhere, but he doesn’t stop looking. There are still so many books to go through. There could still be something here. There has to be.

Isaac will keep digging until the tug of tension releases in his skull, until that memory is sated and satisfied. Isaac has to keep looking.

Except, his phone rings and Isaac has to answer. He'll come back to the books.

"Hello?" Isaac accepts the call without checking the number. He'd bet good money that he knows exactly who it is.

"Hey, Iz." (He's right. It's Scott.)

"I've found nothing," Isaac admits. "I've barely made a dent in the books, so I'm sure there will be something here, but... I haven't found it yet."

"That's okay," Scott says. *"Stiles found something."*

Isaac's heart jumps. "S-Stiles?"

"Yes, Isaac. Stiles."

Then, Scott goes quiet, like he's waiting for an objection or a question. But Isaac isn't going to ask. If Stiles came to Scott with a discovery, then Isaac isn't going to say a thing about it. He's going to keep his mouth shut and proceed with caution.

He does have to say something though. He lands on a tentative, awkward, "Uh. What did he find?"

"He was going over the footage from the communications tower and realized there has to be a second entrance somewhere. We see Clarke and the electrician go in, but three people come out," And, for clarification. *"Clarke, the electrician, and the last chimera."*

"So, we need to find that entrance?" Isaac guesses.

"Exactly," Scott says. *"We'll stop by the loft to pick you up in, like, five minutes."*

Without thinking, Isaac questions, "We?"

"Yes, Isaac. We."

Isaac suppresses the urge to do a ridiculous victory lap around the loft. Instead, he waits until the line goes dead, then he releases a massive sigh of relief. For the first time in days, he feels... hopeful.

They're back at the communications tower for the second time that day. But, this time, Stiles is with them. Isaac is trying very hard not to make a big deal out of it. (Stiles keeps shooting him impatient glares, so he's pretty sure he's failing, but he also doesn't really care.)

The space is just as messy as it was earlier. Nothing looks any different, but they keep searching. They must have missed something.

"You see that?" Stiles asks.

Naturally, he's gravitated towards the pool of blood. It's not quite as wet as before, but it's certainly not dry either. The smell of it overwhelms Isaac's senses. He almost feels like he needs to cough or sneeze.

"I see blood," Scott says, seemingly unbothered by the putrid scent. (Typical.)

"Look where it leads," Stiles says. He uses the blacklight to guide their eyes, dragging beyond the blood and the clawed up filing cabinet.

There's a hatch in the wall marked with: **CONFINED SPACE**. For a moment, Isaac throbs with panic and sweat leaks into his palms. But then, he sees what Stiles is really looking at. There's a grate. Blood trickles between the metal bars and disappears down below.

Scott moves quick towards the filing cabinet, but Stiles doesn't. He stays next to Isaac. Of course, he would notice the blip in composure. Of course, he wouldn't let it go. Of course, Stiles is assessing and inspecting. So, calculated and practiced, Isaac returns to calm. He wipes his palms on his jeans and ignores the echo of the words in his mind (*confined space, confined space, confined space*). He gives Stiles nothing to worry about.

The same can't be said for Scott.

He's straining against the weight of the filing cabinet. He should be able to lift it with ease. He should have no problems at all, but he groans and the metal falls with a creaking crash.

That's much scarier than the temporary threat of a confined space. That reminds Isaac of Derek. The lack of reaction to the scent of blood, the decreased strength, the—

Isaac ignores it all. He ignores the memories of dead friends and freezers. He ignores the fear and jumps into help, slipping his fingers under the lip of the cabinet. Scott doesn't let go. He could – Isaac would be able to do this on his own – but he doesn't. Instead, they work together to bring the cabinet to an upright position. It falls into balance with another metallic screech.

Isaac traces his fingers over the large claw carvings. His hands aren't big enough to fit the shape. It's another reminder that this creature, this chimera, is something so much more.

Then, Isaac turns to see what they've uncovered.

There's a grate in the floor, though it would hardly function as such now. The metal bars are scratched through and torn apart, leaving a gaping hole. Beyond the entrance, there's a ladder and a tunnel of unending darkness.

Here they go again.

—

The three of them climb down the ladder and into the tunnel. By now, they've all been down here before, but that was nowhere near the communications tower. That was at the railway depot on the other side of Beacon Hills. Meaning: these tunnels must stretch for miles. Meaning: Isaac isn't feeling very optimistic.

Regardless, Stiles turns the blacklight on, shining the glow over the stone ground below. And, in an instant, there's a ripple of purple-black smoke.

Mercury.

For a moment, none of them move. They stand there, looking at each other and the trace elements of evidence. It's a back and forth standstill, a question of, *are we really doing this again?*

Isaac takes the first step.

He's not sure why, he definitely doesn't particularly enjoy the idea of exploring the dank underground, but, if they turn back now, the tentative alliance could be broken. Isaac doesn't want to risk that. Somehow, he'd rather risk the unknown chimera than the breaking of this fragile peace. If this is the first step towards reconciliation, then Isaac will take it. Again and again.

So, Isaac steps forward and the other two follow.

Stiles keeps the light steady as they enter into the darkness of the tunnels, using the trail of smoke as a map. Isaac expects it to lead them through twisting turns and past damp corners. Isaac expects to feel lost and tired. Isaac expects the hunt to last for hours.

It doesn't.

Just up ahead, there's a shift in the tunnel. Like an open doorway, the tunnel momentarily rounds out at all sides. It's a lip that they'd have to step over, a break in the continuous flow of pipes to mark the new branch of forever hallway.

"What is that?" Scott asks.

Along the floor, written in mercury, are the words: *Damnatio Memoriae*.

"It looks like Latin," Stiles says, glancing between Scott and the message.

Isaac has no idea what it means – he still can't speak Latin, still can only look at pictures – but he guarantees it's nothing good.

"Hold up that light. I'm gonna get a picture of it," Scott says. He brings his phone out of his pocket, steadying the camera to focus on the foreign language.

They don't hear her coming. One second, Stiles is holding the light up for Scott. The next, he's falling to the ground with a groan of disgruntled pain.

And, when Scott and Isaac look up, Tracy is standing there. Tracy, who has just paralyzed Stiles. Tracy, who is supposed to be dead. Tracy, who attacks.

She lunges with sharp claws and swishing tail, taking Scott and Isaac on at once. Even with the stunned shock of resurrection, neither one hesitates. They begin the careful dance of dodging blows and trying to decide how hard they should be punching back.

"Isaac, behind you!"

Isaac hears Stiles' shouted warning, but it's too late. Before he can turn around, he has claws sinking into his side. The painful sting is

nothing, it's an average everyday occurrence, but the electricity that comes with it *is* something. It's *everything*. It's unprepared, it's shock, it's weakness.

Sparks of power slam into Isaac. The current ripples through his body, taking his muscles hostage, turning him tight and frozen. It sends Isaac back in time, to hospital parking lots and water filled lofts. It sends him out of the present and into distraction.

It allows Tracy to make contact. And, in a matter of seconds, Isaac joins Stiles on the ground, paralytic venom coursing through his veins.

Tracy goes for Scott next. He might be struggling with his powers, but he's still an alpha. His eyes are burning red and his claws are out, and, when Tracy swipes, he grabs her wrist.

The second chimera – Josh, Isaac is pretty sure – comes from behind, but Scott is ready for him too. He twists Tracy's arm and uses his grip to push her forward. Her claws pierce Josh's middle. And then, Scott rips her hand away and throws her back. She falls to the ground and Josh collapses, paralyzed on the other side of Stiles.

"Sucks, doesn't it?" Stiles snarks, but Isaac isn't paying attention to him. He's watching Scott.

Isaac has to look up as far as his eyes will allow to see, but Scott isn't backing down yet. His fangs are dropped and his eyes are glowing and he's snarling at a seemingly blank wall.

Corey materializes out of nowhere.

Isaac doesn't know why, but seeing him alive has a different impact than the others. Maybe it's the way he's not trying to fight, maybe it's the way his heart is pounding with fear, maybe it's something else entirely. All Isaac knows is that Scott's not backing down and he's close to calling out a protest, but then... someone else beats him to.

"Okay!" Theo yells. He steps into the circular doorway with that same stupid smile. "Maybe they're not ready to take on an alpha." A pointed look toward Corey. "Especially one that can smell fear."

"He's got fangs!" Corey protests, but, again, Isaac isn't paying attention. He's watching Theo.

It's the first time Isaac has properly seen him since the night of the supermoon. Theo is too close. He's too close to Scott and Isaac is

paralyzed and he can't do anything and—

The growl escapes Isaac's throat before he can stop it.

Theo looks down at him, that same smile turning wicked and smug. It shape-shifts into a sneer of disdain. It's cocky and infuriating and all Isaac can remember is him standing in the comic store. He remembers that hand held over Theo's heart, the words seemingly pulled straight from Isaac's own mind.

Isaac feels sick just looking at him.

"What did you do?" Scott asks. He's forcing Theo to look away from Isaac. It's a question that needs to be asked, but the timing is calculated and protective.

"I needed some new friends," Theo says, though he barely gives the undead chimeras a second glance as they collect Josh and move to the edge of the tunnel. "I don't take rejection well."

Theo steps down from the ledge. He's staring down at Isaac and Stiles. Stiles doesn't respond well to intimidation, simply deadpans, "Hey, Theo."

Isaac doesn't like this. He's too close. He's pulled Scott and Stiles apart before, he's *killed* Scott before. He's too dangerous. He needs to—

Theo stomps down on the stone floor, shattering and disturbing the Latin message. *And there goes their only clue.*

Isaac seriously hates Theo so much. There are no words for it. There's only sheer rage.

"You're going to leave here thinking that you need to... *worry* about me," Theo says. He's walking closer to Scott now – Isaac clenches his teeth to avoid emitting another threatened rumble. "But you're wrong. We're actually back on the same side."

Isaac doesn't care what Theo says. They're never going to be on the same side again. They're never going to trust him again. Again, again, again. Because they were on the same side, they did trust him. Scott trusted him.

Theo's ruined such a good thing and he doesn't even know it.

"Because that thing," Theo gestures to the ceiling above, referencing

the destruction of the communications tower, “*that’s* what we need to worry about. Your pack... and mine.” (He couldn’t steal Scott’s pack so he manufactured one. Pathetic.) “We’re gonna go to school and pretend like we’re normal teenagers, but at night, we’re going to be fighting for our lives.”

“What is it?” Stiles asks.

“It’s not a chimera,” Theo says. It’s not a real answer. It’s vague and shallow. It’s more bullshit. If they were really on the same side, if Theo was really worried about this thing, he would give them information. He would tell them everything he can because he knows that, as much as he might not like it, Scott is *everyone’s* best chance at survival.

“But it’s just a kid underneath,” Scott says. “Someone like us.”

Theo smirks. “Not anymore.”

Isaac knows he shouldn’t do it. He’s paralyzed and vulnerable while Theo stands above him with a shadow of undead teenagers behind him. Isaac knows it’s stupid, but he can’t help himself. He can’t keep the words down.

“Not like your sister was?”

There’s a flicker in Theo, a murmur of hesitation, a wink of feeling.

“What were you grieving on the bridge?” Isaac asks. It doesn’t come out quite as scathing as he intends, but he’s not sure he cares. Now that he’s started, he doesn’t want to stop, “You can steady your heart, but you can’t fake chemosignals. So, what was it? ‘Cause it certainly wasn’t your sister. Nobody who’s *really* lost someone would *ever* weaponize their grief the way you did. So, what really happened?”

Did you kill her?

The question pounds at the back of Isaac’s mind, but he can’t say it. That’s pushing too far if he’s wrong and it’s too nauseating if he’s right. Instead, he gives a mocking, “Hm?”

Theo twitches. His body shifts forward, like he’s making to strike, but he doesn’t follow through. He rolls his shoulder back and tilts his chin up. And then, he turns and disappears down the tunnels.

“Bro. Bro. That was... *awesome*. Did you see the look on his face?” Stiles rambles as Scott helps him into a seated position. The chimeras and the Latin message are gone, but they can’t leave yet. They have to wait for the kanima venom to work its way out of their systems, which means they’re gonna be in these tunnels a while longer – just like Isaac predicted.

“I hate him,” Isaac grumbles. Scott moves to help him next, propping Isaac’s body against the wall next to Stiles. Isaac whispers, “Thanks.”

Stiles scoffs an almost laugh. “I hate to break it to you, but he kinda acts the same way you did in sophomore year.”

Isaac’s stomach twists. He forces the rise of bile back down and keeps the defensive out of his voice. He maintains an even, nearly snarky tone, “But I was never *actually evil*. I never seriously hurt anyone, I just – I had a lot of misplaced anger at the world. I was dealing with becoming a werewolf, becoming a fugitive, being basically homeless, having an emotionally stunted Derek as an alpha, getting thrown into the middle of the kanima-Gerard bullshit, all the while grieving my dad’s death while *also* feeling guilty for even being sad about it in the first place after everything he did to me.”

Isaac has to gasp on his next inhale. He’s not sure how long that rant has been built up inside him, but it feels good to let it out.

“Dude...” Stiles says. It comes out almost apologetic. “Are you... Are you okay? I–” Stiles cuts himself off. “Things really could have been so much worse.”

Isaac laughs. He probably shouldn’t, but it’s all so ridiculous. He can’t believe this is his life. And that was only a fraction of the absurdity, that barely even scratched the surface.

Then, Stiles laughs too. “Oh my god. How is this reality? Are you guys sure we aren’t in some collective fever dream? Like...”

Scott is looking between the two of them. “This is not funny.”

He’s trying so hard to be serious and disapproving, but there’s a slight upturn of his lips and he’s cracking. And then, they’re all laughing. Two of them paralyzed, one of them just back from the dead. It’s so ridiculous that it has to be comical.

Scott joins them on the ground as the laughter dies down. He’s scuffing his feet over the broken stone of the floor. “He knew what it

meant and I can't even remember the words."

The mood drops, but it has to. It's another conversation that needs to be had.

"Damnatio memoriae," Stiles recites.

Isaac and Scott turn to look at Stiles in fear-laced curiosity.

"It means the condemnation of memory," he explains. "I think it also means that whatever the Dread Doctors created, whatever this last chimera really is, it's not something new. It's something old." Stiles looks up at Scott. "*Really* old."

"So, they didn't create a new creature," Scott begins.

Isaac finishes with, "They resurrected one."

—

Time drags on as the venom drains. Until Isaac can move with no issue and Stiles can move with... some issue. Until Scott reaches out and drags his fingers through the dust formed by Theo's crumbling rock. Until he traces a slightly lopsided circle.

"We need help," Scott says. He's looking at Stiles. "If Theo's got his own pack now, then we need ours." This is the moment of truth. "We have to get the others back."

"The others?" Stiles questions. His head tips back and his eyes narrow, like Scott is being childish, like hope is already lost. "You mean *Kira* who's currently battling a homicidal fox spirit inside of her, *Malia* who isn't even speaking to us, *Lydia* who's stuck in Eichen House, and *Liam* who almost killed you?"

The list is almost as ridiculous as Isaac's. It should seem entirely hopeless, but, with Scott, it seems only *marginally* hopeless. Besides, they have no other choice. They need help – *real* help.

"Also known as our best friends," Scott says.

Stiles doesn't take as much convincing as Isaac expected. He rolls his neck and his eyes and makes a skeptical noise, but asks, "Okay. How?"

Scott inclines his head. And, like it's the easiest thing in the world, "One by one."

Scott looks down at the circle drawn in dirt, then back at Stiles. His brows are lifted in an expectant sort of way.

“You’re not seriously going to make me do it?” Stiles mumbles, but Isaac can tell that he’s already accepting his fate.

“You’re part of the pack, right?” Scott says. He’s got this playful smile on his lips, one that really only comes out when Stiles is around.

“Okay, yeah, so’s Isaac. Make him do it,” Stiles complains, but he’s already extending a tremor-racked hand and his fingers are dipping into the dust. And then, there’s a second ring circling the first.

Scott’s pack symbol.

Stiles and Scott are still staring at each other. Stiles flicks his brows, as if to say, *satisfied?*

Scott’s smile is definitely a yes.

And, as Scott drags Stiles up to his feet and supports his weight through the exit of the tunnel, Stiles says, “I still hate that tattoo.”

“I know,” comes Scott’s immediate response.

It’s a moment just for the two of them. It’s a collective release of tension and a symbol of more than just pack. It’s a symbol of brotherhood and history. It’s a moment just for Scott and Stiles, but Isaac gets to witness it.

For someone who was just paralyzed for two hours, he feels way luckier than he should.

—

Under the guise of doing more research, Isaac goes to the school library. He hesitates for half a breath. Part of him isn’t ready to return to the scene of the crime and epiphany, but the larger part of him knows that he can’t avoid it forever.

It’s better to do this now, when the space is quiet and empty and Isaac can take his time.

He slides his keycard over the reader. The door clicks open. And, slowly, Isaac crosses the threshold.

Nothing happens.

There's no flash of lighting or booming of percussive sound. There's only his own quiet footfall and the dark of the fading evening sky.

Isaac exhales.

He takes the stairs to the library's upper level. He walks with a purposeful destination, up to the familiar shelves lined with yearbooks spanning the past decade. Carefully, Isaac removes a stack of books. He reveals a circle of signatures. His pack and his friends.

Isaac takes a sharpie from his pocket. He's not here to do more research.

On the edge of the pack, just next to his own initials, Isaac writes with careful precision: **E.R.** and **V.B.**

They're still with him.

Chapter End Notes

Did you guys hear about the Teen Wolf convention in August with Daniel Sharman? And they're calling the Daniel and Posey group the "Because I Trust You" duo op? My impact.

Codominance

Chapter Summary

Contain dialogue from season 5 episode 13

Word count: 6,803

Chapter Notes

Posting this super early in the morning because I'm getting my wisdom teeth taken out today and don't want to forget later :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Isaac, you ready?” Derek’s voice calls up the spiral stairs.

“Just a sec!” Isaac yells back. He hastily shoves spare, just-in-case clothing into his backpack. Then, more delicately, he slides his ring daggers into the front pocket. He feels highly unprepared, like maybe he should be bringing more than just the bare minimum essentials, but, hopefully, they’ll be back in town by tomorrow evening. Hopefully, Isaac won’t need more than the bare minimum.

Isaac throws his bag over his shoulder and jogs down the stairs. Derek is waiting in the open living room, feet kicked up on the coffee table. When he hears Isaac approaching, he drops his shoes to the floor and moves to stand. Though, he doesn’t make for the exit yet. Instead, he picks a book up from the table and holds it out to Isaac. *The History of Punishments*, the leather bound cover reads.

(Well, that’s pleasant.)

“This references damnatio memoriae,” Derek explains. “It’s... not much, but.” He sighs and shrugs, “I know there’s something familiar in the creature, something I’ve heard of before. I’ll try to remember while you’re gone.”

“Thank you,” Isaac says sincerely. Even the brief mention feels like striking gold.

Isaac tucks the book into his bag, and asks, “Is that all you’re going to do while I’m gone? Are you going to be okay here by yourself?”

Derek rolls his eyes. “I can handle spending a night alone.”

Isaac doesn't miss the way Derek avoids the first question. He's still being cagey about whatever it is he's doing with Braeden. Isaac is marginally annoyed by it, mostly just because, if Derek told him, then maybe he could help.

But, at the same time, Derek has made it clear that it's not his story to share. And, given the way Isaac had so carefully guarded Stiles' secret... he can't necessarily spite Derek for doing the same. It would be more than a little hypocritical.

So, Isaac just smirks and says, "If you say so."

—

When Derek drops Isaac off at the McCall house, he finds Stiles standing in the driveway. The Jeep's hood is popped open and he's peering over to fiddle with the parts inside. Isaac strides over, leaning against the Jeep and saying, "Hey."

Stiles spares a quick glance up at Isaac, nods, "Hey."

"Having trouble with the Jeep again?" Isaac asks.

Stiles shrugs, "Just the usual. She'll be up and running in no time."

Isaac's lips turn down in a half-frown, but he just nods. It's not like he knows any better.

"How's your dad?" Isaac asks, curious and concerned. Last he heard, Stilinski was still in the hospital and Stiles was still trying to sleep there every night.

Stiles looks up from the Jeep again. This time, it's a sustained motion. This time, he's smiling. "He got discharged earlier today. I'm sure he'll be going back to work soon."

Isaac quirks a brow, "Oh. Is that where you get it from?"

"Get what?" Stiles asks. His expression is twisted in mock offense, eyes narrowed and voice a little sharp.

"Your inability to take and break let anyone else take over," Isaac says. "Is that genetic?"

Stiles doesn't respond. He just huffs and lifts the wrench in his hand, a joking threat of motion. It makes Isaac's head tip back with soft laughter. The movement angles Isaac's ears towards the house, and

that's when he hears them.

"Where are you guys going?"

That's Liam's voice. He sounds small and unsure. Isaac's not sure how to feel about his presence. He hasn't seen Liam since the night of the supermoon, not more than a passing in the hall.

"To get Kira. Her dad told us that her mom took her out to New Mexico, to this place called Shiprock. They're trying to figure out a way to help her, but it's dangerous. So, we're gonna go find her and bring her back."

That's Scott. He sounds tired and sad. Isaac knows exactly how to feel about that. Scott's sadness becomes his sadness. It's despondent, it's exhausted, it's hopeless.

"I'll come with you."

Isaac closes his eyes to the rejection that he knows is coming.

"No, you can't."

There's footsteps inside now, like Scott is trying to walk away, like he's trying to spare whatever feeble calm they've found.

"Let me help. Let me do something. Just tell me what I can do."

Liam's voice comes more urgent. He's pressing forward, he's pleading, he's desperate. He's genuine in his desires, but Scott doesn't budge.

"Don't do anything."

Then, the footsteps pick up again. Isaac opens his eyes to see Scott exiting the house with a duffel bag thrown over his shoulder. He keeps his gaze ducked low, like maybe he's avoiding Isaac's attention. He tosses his bag in the Jeep, rounding the front to join Stiles in the manipulating of parts.

"Hey," Stiles says. And, "Glad *someone* is helping."

He gives a pointed look towards Isaac. Isaac angles his head with a humorless smile, though he's not actually bothered. He knows what this is. This is Stiles breaking the tension, this is Stiles bringing levity to the air before his inevitable question of, "So, what did he want?"

Scott looks down and away again. His head sways in minute movement, considering. Then, he flicks his eyes up to Stiles, "To

help.”

“You gonna let him?” Stiles asks, attention shifting between Scott and the Jeep, back and forth and back and forth.

“Eventually, I guess,” Scott says. He sounds less sad now, but just as worn.

“Okay, but shouldn’t he be a little higher on your priority list right now?” Stiles asks. “I mean, since he’s the only other actual werewolf, your only actual beta.”

Scott looks at Isaac. His brows are drawn together in that soft confusion of his. Slowly, he turns back to Stiles, throwing a thumb over his shoulder to point at Isaac, “Um...?”

Stiles gives a dramatic, exasperated sigh, neck rolling. “I said the only *other* actual werewolf. Meaning, other than you two.” Then, under his breath, “*God.*”

Isaac laughs a little. Scott smiles at him.

The quiet amusement doesn’t last. Far too quickly for Isaac’s liking, Scott’s grin falls away. His demeanor slumps – defeated. “You didn’t see the way he came at me,” Scott says. “You didn’t see the *look* in his eyes.”

“Well, I’ve been with you on a full moon, so I’ve seen that look,” Stiles says, head bobbing. It might be a little unfair, whatever memory it is that he’s dragging up, but he has a point.

Liam went too far. He did the unthinkable. He nearly killed Scott.

But... he’s still learning. He doesn’t have a secure anchor yet. And he has this anger, this anger that they knew would make things more difficult for him. Like the rest of them, Liam got manipulated by Theo. Theo found Liam’s deepest turmoil and twisted it to his will. Just like he did with Isaac.

“You want to get the band back together, Scott, you don’t leave out the drummer,” Stiles says. He walks away, opening the driver’s side of the Jeep and checking his progress with the engine.

It leaves Isaac and Scott alone outside. It leaves Scott sighing, hands pressed along the Jeep and head tipping forward.

Unexpected, Scott turns to Isaac. “Do you agree?”

He’s doing what he promised he would. He’s asking Isaac for his opinion. He wants his honest answer. He wants his truth. He wants, “Maybe.” Isaac shrugs, “Scott, it’s – it’s *Liam*. He’s your beta, he’s the one that saved you from becoming a berkserker, he’s... I know it might take some time, but you’re going to get past this. He needs you. And, honestly? You need him too.”

Scott’s lips pull in a closed mouth, slight smile. It’s sad, but it’s real. He nods, “Right.”

Then, engine rumbling and headlights blaring, the Jeep comes to life.

—

They begin their drive with late night skies overhead – twinkling stars, half crescent moon, and thin gray clouds. It’s a peaceful sort of drive, especially once they’re out of town and onto the highway. The lights of the city fade and the lights of the sky shine brighter. It’s a calm and quiet picture.

Isaac sits in the backseat, the perfect view for observing Scott and Stiles. The air between them is still a little heavy, still a little unresolved, but it’s loosening. The tension is bleeding away and they’re falling back into the familiar pattern of best friends turned brothers.

The view of the sky and rolling landscape are beautiful, but the comfort of connection is better. Isaac can hardly tear his eyes away from them. Stiles and Scott, his best friend and his... *something*.

Isaac doesn’t know how to categorize Scott anymore. But, then again, he never really did. Even before, he knew this thing with Scott was special. Even before he had the name for this feeling, he knew Scott was *more* than anyone else. Even before he understood, he *knew*.

Isaac doesn’t have the words for Scott, but he doesn’t need them. A label wouldn’t change anything, wouldn’t change the heat of Isaac’s heart, wouldn’t change the fondness of this view.

And, when Isaac falls into a fitful sleep, it’s with the warmth of Scott and Stiles settled in his chest.

—

Isaac is still warm, but it's not a pleasant feeling. Not anymore. They've been driving for hours and the sun is beating down and it's so *hot*. His hands are getting clammy, so he repeatedly wipes them on his jeans, trying to protect Derek's book from the moisture.

"Man, I think the Jeep's overheating again," Scott says, similarly sweaty and damp.

Stiles runs a hand over his forehead, "Probably."

"Should we pull over and put more antifreeze in it?" Scott asks.

Stiles sighs, "Uh, no. We can just turn the heat on."

Which seems entirely counterintuitive to Isaac, but it's not like he knows any better. So, Stiles switches on the heat and Scott rolls down his window. It lets in a soft breeze, but it doesn't do much when the air outside is just as warm.

"Did you find anything yet?" Stiles asks, eyes flicking to the rearview mirror, getting a look at Isaac.

"Mostly the same stuff you already knew," Isaac says, shaking his head. "'*Damnatio memoriae* was a Roman practice,'" he reads, "'a government decree to destroy the images of the damned. They would scratch off their names from inscriptions, chisel their faces off of statues.'" Isaac wipes sweat from his brow. "'The Romans believed it was a punishment worse than death.'"

"Being forgotten," Stiles fills in, voice blank.

But it's more than being forgotten. It's more like being erased, like a person is wiped from existence. Like they never were and they never would be.

"Listen to this," Isaac says, eyes still skimming the page with rapt attention. "'*Damnatio memoriae* was later used on a serial killer in 1598 known as the Demon Tailor. He lured children into his shop in Paris where he would kill them and boil the flesh off their bones to eat. The courts believed the crimes so horrible they ordered all documents destroyed. To this day, no one knows his real name.'"

"So, the Dread Doctors resurrected a killer who was *so bad* that he had to literally be erased from history," Stiles says, sardonic in his monotone bewilderment.

Scott looks at Stiles. “A killer that became a werewolf.”

“Which probably made him a better killer,” Isaac says. The image is coming together now, a picture of aligning circumstances, a terrible coincidence of power and horror.

“Could you sound less excited? *Please*,” Stiles’ cynical tone pivots onto Isaac, exasperated and a little impatient.

“Sorry,” Isaac says. He hadn’t meant for the lilt in his voice to convey excitement. This definitely isn’t good news by any means, “It’s just... it’s fascinating.”

Stiles’ eyes pull to the rearview mirror again. His disdainful expression falls away, replaced by something curious and vaguely amused. “You really do love this stuff, don’t you?” He’s smiling at Isaac. “You know that could be an area of study, right? I would say it wouldn’t be very helpful in the real world, but in Beacon Hills? We could use that kind of expertise.”

The words strike a chord in Isaac. A strumming of intrigue and piqued interest. *Huh*.

—

Later, when they’ve switched drivers, Scott attempts a casual question of, “Are you still not talking to Malia?”

The nonchalance doesn’t quite meet the mark.

“Uh—” Stiles half squeaks. “She’s not talking to me.”

Isaac feels like maybe he shouldn’t be putting all the attention on Stiles, but his morbid curiosity won’t allow him to look away. He watches as brief eye contact passes between Stiles and Scott, as Stiles mouth parts, as he sighs.

“Or anyone, I guess,” Stiles amends.

“I think I know why,” Scott says. His fingers twist on the wheel, grip tightening and loosening in a minute and nervous twitch. “I think she found her mother.”

Stiles flinches. It’s a subtle, barely there movement, but Isaac picks up on it. Isaac notices the way he seems to jump in his seat. His fist comes up, trembling just so, “Her mother, as in the Desert Wolf?”

“Yeah,” Scott breathes, seeming almost as affected by the information as Stiles is.

Stiles turns away for a moment. He looks out the window, then, with a shake of his head, he falls forward again. “I *knew* she was still looking,” he mutters with a broken sigh. “She erased her name off my board, but I just... I – I knew she hadn’t stopped.”

“When I was at her house, I’m–” Scott turns his neck towards Isaac, just for a brief second, without taking his eyes off the road, “pretty sure Braeden was there too.”

“*Braeden?*” Stiles exclaims, voice pure shock and distress. “What, did you catch her scent?”

“A-Actually, it was her motorcycle,” Scott explains. “I smelled her exhaust.”

“Um,” Isaac speaks up from the backseat. He feels a tug of guilt, but forces it down. He didn’t know Braeden’s return was a secret, so he’s not at fault. Still, he has to confirm, “I haven’t seen her, but she’s been back in town since,” Isaac swallows, “the night of the supermoon.”

“And *when* were you going to share this information?” Stiles bites, though it comes off less irritated than he probably intended.

“I thought it was common knowledge,” Isaac says, voice tipping up like a question. He shrugs, “I didn’t know it had anything to do with Malia. I thought she was just here to see Derek.”

It’s then that Isaac realizes that *this* is the secret Derek has been keeping from him. Whether out of loyalty to Braeden or the Hale name, Derek is involved.

Isaac doesn’t mention that to Scott or Stiles. He’s not sure why – it’s not like they could do much to stop Derek, not like it would reflect badly on Isaac. But, still, his protective instinct kicks in and he keeps it to himself.

“What the hell do you think they’re gonna do?” Stiles asks. He sounds almost frightened.

“Something that Malia doesn’t want to tell us about, so,” Scott says, he tips his head in a sideways nod, “probably something bad.”

Isaac doesn’t know what it is in Scott’s tone that clues Stiles in, but,

almost instantly, he's saying, "Oh my god. You already know, don't you? It's like – It's the chemosignals, right?"

Isaac angles his focus towards Scott, watching him closely. He sighs and adjusts his grip on the wheel again. He keeps his eyes firmly forward, straight on the road, and nods, "Aggression."

"How much?" Stiles asks.

"I think she's gonna kill her," Scott says. His eyes are wide and a little frantic. Isaac can see his eyebrows rippling in the rearview mirror. "She's gonna kill her mother."

What the hell did you get yourself into, Derek?

Just then, the engine sputters. The entire car starts to shake and groan.

"What's happening?" Scott asks, eyes pouring over the dashboard, looking for a warning light, a reason for the grinding of gears.

"Um," Stiles sits up a little, leaning forward. "Yeah, we're out of gas. That's out of gas."

"It says we have a half a tank," Scott counters.

"Yeah, not necessarily," Stiles says, refusing to meet Scott's eye.

Scott glances at Stiles, unimpressed and unsurprised. "You didn't fix the gas gauge, did you?"

"Not necessarily," Stiles repeats without missing a beat.

Scott pulls over on the side of the road, dragging the Jeep's wheels through grains of sand. Once he's parked, he turns on Stiles, giving him the full effect of his vexation. He stares at Stiles with an intensity, like, *I wish I could say I can't believe you, but... this checks out.*

"I'll look up the nearest gas station," Isaac says, already pulling his phone out of his pocket. He does a quick search, finding that, "We lucked out. There's one half a mile up the road."

"See, Scotty! It's fine!" Stiles exclaims, too bright and cheery for anyone to take seriously. "We can totally walk that far."

Yeah, Isaac has no interest in doing that. Besides, it'd probably be good for Scott and Stiles to have some one-on-one time together

without Isaac acting as a buffer.

So, as Scott and Stiles both reach for their seatbelts, he says, “I’ll hang back. You know, just in case.”

“Yeah, just in case you’re too lazy?” Stiles fires into the backseat.

Isaac responds with an impressive display of emotional maturity. He flips Stiles off. With both hands.

While he waits, Isaac rifles through *The History of Punishment*. He’s already combed through it twice before, knows there’s no other mention of the Demon Tailor or *damnatio memoriae*, but he looks again anyway.

Ironically, *damnatio memoriae* – the punishment that’s supposed to be worse than death, the punishment that’s supposed to protect the public from the horrors of the past – is exactly what’s keeping them from stopping the resurrected killer. If there were records of this creature, of who it was and how it was defeated, then they might be able to repeat history. Then, they might have the information required to end this, once and for all.

Isaac sighs and closes the book. He traces the embossed lettering of the cover with his thumb. Maybe Isaac is just desensitized to punishment, but, as bleak as the book’s contents are, he wasn’t lying when he said it was fascinating.

He thinks about what Stiles had said – about mythology being a potential area of study. Isaac had told Stiles, months ago now, that he would start looking into colleges. But, if he’s honest, he still hasn’t done that. Mostly because the supernatural evils of Beacon Hills came out of hibernation, but also because he still doesn’t know where to begin.

But, this? This could be a starting point.

Isaac doesn’t want to be someone that’s dragged along out of pity or obligation. He wants to feel like he’s a contributing member of the pack. And, ever since he’s taken a front seat in their research, he’s started to find that feeling. All of this started because he wanted to take back some control, wanted to feel like he had a say in who lives and who dies. He wanted to have some independence, to be able to survive without relying on others. He wanted to be able to provide. He

wanted to help.

And he's been able to do that. He's found a way to participate. He's found something unique he can bring to the table. He's found strength and power in knowledge. He's found his part to play, his role to fill, his job to do.

But, this? This sounds too perfect. This sounds too good to be true.

—

Isaac gets bored of waiting. They've been cramped up in the car for at least twelve hours now, and, despite not wanting to walk to the gas station, encouraging blood flow might do him some good.

So, Isaac pulls the ring daggers out of his bag and gets out of the car. He stays off the road, staying in the expansive desert to the right of the Jeep. Isaac swings the daggers, looping them around his fingers and falling into a firm grip.

Isaac tries to ignore the feeling of sand shifting under his feet. He tries not to think back to the fight in Mexico (though it's difficult when the rotating daggers seem to draw the memory up through his fingertips). Isaac's life is going to be pretty restrictive if he can't handle being in the same vicinity as sand. He's already limited by his claustrophobia. He doesn't need anymore triggers.

Isaac tries to ignore the sand, and, instead, focuses on the fluid feel of the daggers. He lunges forward in quick strikes, spinning back around and slicing through the air. He fights against an invisible opponent, practicing tricky techniques and the transition from one move to the next.

The desert sun rains down in a harsh shine and an itching heat, but Isaac doesn't give into it. He lets sweat dampen his curls and bead on his skin. He presses through the minor discomfort and the burn of his poorly stretched muscles.

Isaac keeps practicing, keeps dropping daggers and resetting, again and again until he hears approaching footfall.

Isaac slips out of his focused trance and one track mind. He spots Scott and Stiles approaching the Jeep with a red gas container carried between them.

Upon arrival, Scott breaks with a kind smile and a flash of

appreciation. He says, “You’re getting good at that.”

Isaac flushes from more than just the heat. “Uh – Thanks.”

Stiles pulls a face at Isaac. It’s a squinting of eyes and a dragging of brows. His lips twist to one side, like he’s thinking hard, computing and recalculating.

Equal parts necessity and concealing, Isaac wipes the sweat from his face with the bottom of his t-shirt. Then, he retreats into the backseat, hiding from both Stiles and Scott’s attention.

—

As their drive continues and night falls, Isaac notices a lift. Something has shifted. The heaviness between Scott and Stiles has fallen away. Like, the tension has faded. Like, the atmosphere has lightened. Everything feels easier and softer. Everything feels simpler.

Maybe...? Could they have...?

The atmosphere inside the car has calmed, but, outside, it’s a different story. Outside, the world has gone dark and gloomy. Flashes of lightning crack through the sky and tear through the clouds, momentarily bringing bright sparks to the darkness.

“Take a look at this,” Stiles says, pointing across the desert. Thunder rumbles, punctuating his sentence with a tone of dread.

Isaac and Scott lean forward to get a better view. Up ahead, there’s a large stone shape, like a plateau or a barrier. Here, the storm is concentrated, swirling with menacing cumulonimbus and flickering with treacherous bolts.

Shiprock.

“What the hell do you think is happening to her out there?” Stiles whispers.

No one says anything. The only answer comes in a shake of Scott’s head, as if to say, *I don’t know.*

Stiles exhales. Then, he pushes the gearshift and presses hard on the gas. The Jeep speeds up and the rushing really begins. Their road trip switches gears, from lax pace and easy conversation to wrought urgency and frenetic silence.

—

Eventually, they peel off the road. They stand on the precipice of unknown danger, coming upon the edge of the stone and the storm – closer, but still too far to reach or see.

“I don’t know why I believed him,” Scott says. It’s a sudden jump in thought, but, in an instant, Isaac knows what Scott is getting at. And, in an instant, he feels like an intruder. “I don’t know why we didn’t just keep talking that night. Five more minutes, and... and we would’ve figured out that there were two different stories. We would’ve filled in all the blanks.”

Isaac doesn’t know the details, but he knows what Scott is referencing. Theo and Donovan, the confrontation, the miscommunication.

Isaac feels like he’s intruding. He feels like he shouldn’t be here for this, but then, Scott is looking at both of them. He’s looking at Stiles *and* Isaac, he’s speaking to both of them when he says, “Should’ve just kept talking.”

And it’s almost an apology.

Stiles shakes his head. He gets a glimpse of Scott, then stares out at the desert again. Quiet, he says, “He knew we wouldn’t.”

And it’s almost forgiveness.

“I didn’t want it to happen like this,” Scott says. His gaze tips up and he’s peering at the starry sky above.

“Like what?” Isaac asks. He keeps his voice low and hushed.

“I knew,” Scott says, “sooner or later, *one of us*,” he looks at Stiles, “was gonna get a little too much blood on our hands... I half-thought it was gonna be Malia.”

“Well, she definitely seems like she’s working on it,” Stiles says, expression quirking in concurrence. It’s his typical response, that half-baked sincerity, truth dressed up in indifference.

Scott doesn’t really react to the statement. He stays in the same vein, like there’s more he has to say, like he’s been preparing this for days.

“I just always thought that,” Scott licks his lips, “if it were to happen, it – it should be me.” He’s nodding, intensity building and eyes darting

between Stiles and Isaac. “I’m the one that’s constantly putting you guys in danger, risking *your lives* for... people you don’t even know.” His arm pulls up in a sharp gesture. He looks forward again, turning guilty in eyes and scent. He whispers, “It should’ve been me.”

Isaac wants to object, but he doesn’t get the chance.

Stiles claps a hand on Scott’s shoulder, grip affectionate and comforting. “Come on, we only got a few hours till sunrise.” Stiles drops his hand and starts back towards the Jeep, “Let’s go.”

Scott doesn’t move. He’s still staring out ahead, but the guilt in his eyes goes quiet, sharpening into something focused and determined.

“Hey, guys,” he says, pointing into the desert. “Do you see that?”

Isaac follows Scott’s line of sight. There’s a flash of light, but it’s not lightning. There’s a crack of sound, but it’s not thunder. It’s a glint of metal on metal. It’s a clang of sword against sword.

“It’s Kira.”

As the sun rises over the desert, they drive over rough terrain and orange sand. They follow the light of Kira’s sword and the sound of fighting. They race against time and fate, pushing the Jeep to its limits and then a little further still.

They speed up and up and up until the skinwalkers come into view, until Noshiko and Kira focus into detailed shapes, until Scott opens the door and jumps out of the moving vehicle. He somersaults across the sandy ground, springing up with sharp claws and eyes shining red. He growls with ferocious strength and determined power.

“Get in!” Stiles shouts.

They don’t stay to fight because that’s not what they’re here for. They’re here for rescue and reunion. So, Kira and Scott follow Stiles’ voice and his instructions. Kira drops her weapons and runs to the Jeep, climbing in.

“Come on, come on,” Stiles hurries, hands guiding Kira into the back of the car. She collapses uncoordinated in the corner seat with Scott close behind her. “Let’s go.”

One of the skinwalkers throws her spear with great force, but Noshiko isn't bothered. She swings her sword through the air, slicing the wood straight down the middle. It splinters in two, useless against the blade of a nine hundred year old kitsune.

It's all the deterrence they need. Noshiko turns to run as Stiles continues his urgent cries of, "Come on, come on, come on."

Noshiko pulls herself into the front seat. Stiles doesn't wait for the door to close, just immediately presses on the gas, wheel turning quick and practiced. The Jeep makes a sharp swerve to the left. They disappear the same way they came, out of sight and into the dust of the desert.

There's an awkwardly cramped hug of relieved hello between Scott and Kira. Then, a rambling story of the test she faced and the fight she won. And last, the adrenaline begins to dwindle and the tiredness comes to take its place.

After thirty-six hours in the Jeep, Kira and Noshiko have been rescued and saved. It took less than a minute and Isaac didn't even have to get out of the car.

All in a day's work...

—

Isaac has to wake a sleeping Scott from his shoulder in order to get out of the car. Stiles is way too smug about it and Isaac has to resist the urge to punch him. It's all uniquely embarrassing. Isaac wants to bury himself alive.

But, he doesn't. Instead, he clamors out of the Jeep as quickly as he can, darting into the loft building without so much as a wave goodbye. Very subtle, if he would say so himself.

His face is still burning when he steps into the loft. He kind of hopes Derek isn't home, but, of course, he is. He watches Isaac with an expression far too similar to Stiles'. Isaac suggests bringing that up, just to knock Derek down a peg, but then he would have to explain *why* Stiles was being silently teasing in the first place. And Isaac definitely doesn't want to do that.

"Hey," Derek says. He already knows the rescue mission was a success, has been texting Isaac every couple of hours since their departure, so they don't have to talk about that.

Unfortunately, what they do have to talk about is Malia. Isaac would much rather pretend he never heard Scott's theory, but he can't do that, not without the ache of his disappointed conscience. As Derek's family, Isaac has an obligation and an instinct to worry about him. So, he greets, "Hey." Then, cuts to the chase, "Were you ever going to tell me about the Desert Wolf?"

There's a momentary glimmer of surprise, then Derek slumps. He sighs in half-hearted relief, like he's been waiting for Isaac to find out on his own. "I already told you. It wasn't my secret to share."

"I know that, but don't you think premeditated murder cancels out basic human decency?" Isaac prompts. He tries to keep the jealousy out of his voice, tries not to question whether blood is thicker than water. "I mean, seriously, what are you going to do? Are you just going to let Malia kill her?"

Derek scrubs a hand over his beard. He hesitates for a moment before, "I'm going to help Malia find peace and closure. Whatever that means for her."

"What happened to 'we found a better way'?" Isaac asks. And maybe that's a little unfair, but this is a discussion that needs to be had. This is tricky and complicated, but important. Isaac needs to know that he said his piece. Even if Derek doesn't bend, Isaac has to know that he tried. Maybe it's to protect himself more than Derek. And maybe that's selfish, but Isaac can't turn back now.

"It's more complex than that and you know it," Derek says.

Isaac nods. He does know that. But, "Still, Derek, are you – are you sure this is something you want to condone?"

He doesn't bring up Peter, but he's thinking about it. He doesn't mention the fire, but he's thinking about it.

Derek sighs again. "I know that you think by being a part of this I'm approving of Malia's choice to kill, but I'm not."

Isaac's face contorts in an obvious objection.

"No, listen," Derek continues, not letting Isaac get a word in yet. "I'm not very close with Malia. She – She doesn't trust easily and she *definitely* doesn't trust her biology. So, we might be related, but we certainly aren't family. I'm not going to be able to convince her not to do this. I don't think *anyone* would be able to." Derek stresses, "*But...* I

might be able to show her that her blood isn't all bad. And I might be able to protect her from getting hurt."

It's Isaac's turn to sigh. Of course, Derek has a clear and reasonable perspective. Of course, Isaac can't protest that. He doesn't want Malia getting hurt either. And, if this brings her and Derek closer, then that wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing. Even if they never consider each other to be *true* family, they could both use more connections.

"Okay," Isaac says.

"Okay?" Derek questions, like he's not sure what that means, or maybe he was expecting Isaac to put up more of a fight.

"It's your choice to make and I'm not gonna stop you from trying to keep Malia safe," Isaac says with a shrug. "That'd be kinda stupid."

"Right," Derek says. "Well, if that's sorted, then I have some important news for you."

Isaac's brows lift in interest and he hums his question.

"I figured it out," Derek says. Isaac automatically registers his meaning. There's only one thing Derek has been agonizing over, only one memory he couldn't quite reach. And, in an action not dissimilar to the night the road trip began, Derek picks up a book from the coffee table and holds it out to Isaac. He says, "It's called the Beast."

Isaac tears through the pages, flipping to the passage and the shockingly familiar image of a towering werewolf with glowing eyes. Then, he starts to read.

A quadruped wolf-like monster, prowling the Auvergne and south Dordogne areas of France during the year 1764 to 1767, La Bête killed over a hundred people, becoming so infamous that King Louis XV sent one of his best hunters to try and kill it. Even the Church eventually declared the monster a messenger of Satan.

Cryptozoologists believe it may have been a subspecies of hoofed predator, possibly a mesonychid. While others believe it was a powerful sorcerer who could shape-shift into a man-eating monster.

It is believed that La Bête was finally trapped and killed by a renowned hunter who claimed his wife and four children were the first to fall prey to the creature.

And, suddenly, Isaac remembers. He remembers Allison's history report from sophomore year, remembers the link to her family, remembers a silver pendant. He remembers her declaration of, *"his name was Argent."*

Isaac is the one to call Scott that night. He eats the food that Derek forces in front of him, but very quickly disappears upstairs. He's too eager to wait, too desperate to share the discovery.

"Hi," Scott answers. *"I was just about to call. Mason and Liam—"*

"Do you remember Allison's history project in sophomore year? About the Beast of Gevaudan?" Isaac cuts through, too impatient to give a proper preamble or even let Scott finish. He'll feel bad about that later.

Scott makes a soft sound of surprise, but doesn't sound offended when he speaks, only confused, *"Um. Yeah...?"*

"That's what the Dread Doctors resurrected," Isaac rushes all in one breath. "La Bête. The Beast."

Scott's reaction comes in a confused, trailed off series of, *"Wh... How did you...?"*

"It was Derek that figured it out, actually," Isaac says. "We both kept saying it sounded familiar, but couldn't remember what it was, and then... I don't know, I guess something clicked while we were gone."

"This... I mean, it's good to know, but it's also very not good? I know that doesn't make sense but," Scott says, a little jumbled and rambling.

"We need to get in contact with Argent," Isaac says, staying steady to try to keep Scott level too. They don't need to panic right now. This could be the breakthrough they were hoping for. "If the Beast really was killed by an Argent, then he would know the story."

"Okay," Scott says. *"Okay, yeah. Yeah."*

With the revelation out of the way, Isaac settles in his urgency. As expected, there's a small spark of guilt. "Sorry, what were you going to say when you first answered? I totally cut you off."

"No, it's fine, this is super important, Isaac," he sounds two seconds

away from giving needless praise. Fortunately, he keeps it to himself. *"I was just... Mason and Liam stopped by. They've been talking to Corey, trying to get some information about the last chimera and Theo. And, apparently, Theo's looking for an alpha – a blind alpha."*

"Deucalion," Isaac whispers.

"Yeah," Scott says. Then, *"I have an idea, but this has to stay between the two of us. The more people that know the less likely it is to work."*

"Okay..." Isaac says, a little tentative and a little concerned. (Also a little confused as to why Scott is choosing to tell *him* of all people. Though, he's happy about it. Feels a little flush of something warm and pleased. And isn't that ridiculous?)

"When we defeated Deucalion, Derek and I spared his life. We let him go because we knew he had been a good man once. I guess I wanted to give him an opportunity to be that person again. And, ever since, we've heard nothing about him, right?" Scott says, delving into the context of his mystery idea.

"Right," Isaac confirms, still quiet and cautious.

"So... I know this is a big risk, but," Scott pauses, *"what if we found him first?"*

"What are you saying?" (Isaac knows exactly what Scott's saying.)

"We plan a double cross," Scott says, solidifying Isaac's suspicions. *"We get Deucalion to infiltrate Theo's pack, and then he can help us stop whatever he's planning."*

There's at least thirty seconds of silence.

"Isaac?"

"Um," Isaac says. He's thinking. He's weighing the risks. "Well, your track record for blindsides is pretty good. You pulled it off with Gerard, yeah? And he's... he's not *that* different from Theo. I – I think." Isaac hesitates. "I never really saw much of Deucalion and I never heard the stories of who he was before the alpha pack. So, if you think we can trust him, then I trust you."

"So, you think it's a good idea?" Scott clarifies.

Isaac hums in consideration. "It's definitely a risk, but I think, no pun

intended, going in blind with Theo is riskier.”

Scott makes an affirmative noise, *“That was my logic. I think... I think we can trust Deucalion. But, even still, we should take your approach. Give him the opportunity to prove his trust and if anything seems wrong, we’ll come up with a Plan B.”*

Isaac smiles into his phone. “Yeah.”

“So, you’re in?”

“Yeah,” Isaac says. “I’m in.”

“Sick,” Scott says. Then, *“So, hey, I had something else to mention to you. And you can tell me to buzz off if this is crossing a line, but I was just thinking, and then I was, like, well, and—”*

“Hey, Scott, you’re not making any sense,” Isaac says, halfway to laughing. “Just spit it out. Whatever it is, I’m sure I won’t care.”

And he means it. He has no idea what Scott is rambling nonsensically about, but, whatever it is, he doubts it will be as big of a deal as Scott has built it up to be in his head.

“Right, yeah,” Scott says, chuckling with nervous laughter. *“Well, earlier, in the car, Stiles had mentioned how interested you were in all this research stuff. And... it got me thinking... and then I did a quick search and...”* And, all in one breath, Scott says, *“UC Davis has a Classics program.”*

Okay, this is definitely a big deal, but it’s so opposite of negative. This is so opposite of crossing a line.

“You...” Isaac swallows. “Aren’t you applying to UC Davis?”

“Yeah,” Scott whispers. *“I don’t want to force this idea on you or anything, but—”*

Isaac interrupts Scott for the third time in a single phone call. “You wouldn’t mind if I went to the same college as you?”

“I... Isaac, I would love to go to the same college,” Scott says.

“Oh.” Isaac says. “Um, then, yeah, okay, maybe, I—”

This time, Scott is the one to interrupt. He breaks through the staccato syllables of stalling with a quiet, *“Isaac.”*

“Maybe I’ll look into it,” Isaac finishes.

“Yeah?”

Scott sounds so hopeful and excited that, for a moment, Isaac thinks there’s *something*. For a moment, he thinks there’s a glint of *more*.

But then he remembers that this is just who Scott is – attentive and caring and pulling Isaac close. This is just how he’s always been – welcoming and warm and looking out for Isaac’s best interest.

“Yeah,” Isaac says.

It’s not something and it’s not more. It’s just Scott.

Chapter End Notes

Isaac’s not there so you don’t get to see it, but, during the gas station scene, Scott and Stiles definitely have a more in depth conversation about Scott dying. (As well as the canon talk about Donovan, of course.)

The Sword and The Spirit

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 14

Word count: 5,234

Isaac has been staring at a blank college application for at least fifteen minutes. It's not that the initial questions of basic information are all that difficult – well, except for the one's about Isaac's parents, those sting and hurt and are somehow more blank than the rest. Mostly, it's just intimidating. It doesn't help that Isaac had to print the application out at the school library, making it look much longer than it really is. (The added scholarship applications don't help either.)

It's just such a tedious and overwhelming process. Isaac never thought he would get to this point in his life. He doesn't know what to do now that he's actually here. It doesn't quite feel real yet. And acceptance feels like a long shot anyway.

"What're you working on?" Derek asks. He comes up behind Isaac, peering over his shoulder to get a look at the stack of papers and answering his own question. He makes a soft noise of surprise. "Isn't this the school Scott's applying to?"

Isaac looks back and up at Derek, eyebrows pulling together in quiet confusion. "How do you even know that?"

Derek shrugs. "I pay attention when you talk about him."

It's a simple answer, but the words feel weighted, soaked in double meaning and implications. Isaac is beginning to realize that Derek might already know something of Isaac's feelings. It wouldn't be surprising, considering how good of a read they have on each other and how not subtle Isaac has probably been. Still, Isaac isn't ready to put voice to his revelation yet. So, he just says, "Oh."

Graciously, Derek doesn't push the topic further or poke fun. Instead, he smiles and says, "Don't stress so much. With your sob story, you're practically guaranteed admission."

Isaac laughs.

Isaac's shift is pretty mindless. There's no shelving to do so he's stuck behind the counter, but, with very few customers, there's little to do there as well. Mostly, Isaac flips through pages of his application and rereads the same passage about the Beast.

That is, until Stiles walks in.

It's not the first time Stiles has come into the comic store while Isaac was working, but it is the first time he's dropped by unannounced. Immediately, alarm bells flare in Isaac's mind, but Stiles just waltzes up to the counter, leaning his elbows on the glass surface with a slightly too loud, "Hey."

"Hi..." Isaac says, word dragged out in his apprehension. "What are you doing here?"

"What? I can't come visit my best friend?" (Isaac dutifully ignores the way his heart skips.) Stiles is going for casual, but it's forced and pinched and obviously faked.

Isaac doesn't say anything. He simply crosses his arms over his chest and watches Stiles. He watches as Stiles' usual fidgeting turns antsy and stressed. He's practically vibrating with frantic energy, lip caught between his teeth and fingers drumming on the counter.

"I'm worried about Lydia," Stiles blurts. "It's just – It's been too long."

Isaac frowns. He really should have been expecting this. Of course, Stiles is fixated on Lydia and her uncertain fate. And he's right. It has been too long. It's been days since the supermoon and days since Theo dug his way into Lydia's brain and days since she went catatonic.

"Um, well," Isaac says. "Why don't you go visit her tomorrow?"

"I... I hadn't thought of that," Stiles admits. His body stops shaking so much. "Yeah, yeah, I could do that."

Isaac nods. "Yeah." Then, to lighten the mood, "Tell her to hurry up and get better. I don't want to keep taking Art History notes for her forever."

Stiles exhales a half-amused, half-exasperated laugh, eyes and neck rolling. His heart rate is calming in his chest and he seems to be subduing. Still, he doesn't leave. He stays in the comic store and Isaac basks in the company.

“No, I’m just saying, the fact that Batman isn’t your favorite superhero just feels like a crime!” Stiles exclaims. He’s practically shouting and Isaac should probably shush him, but they’re the only ones in the store, so it hardly matters.

“But why?” Isaac stresses. “I’m not even an orphan anymore!”

Stiles’ stare goes blank. “Okay, number one: the fact that you can say you’re not an orphan anymore and have it make perfect sense...” He draws a monotone and emphasized, “Oh my god.” And, “Number two: Batman just... suits you.”

Isaac screws up his face. “I’m taking full offense to that.”

“*What* is your issue!” Stiles demands. It’s phrased like a question, but it comes out like a disgruntled cry.

“His parents are killed and he’s like ‘boo-hoo this city and police force sucks,’ *but then*, instead of taking an active interest in reform, he just puts on a mask and starts personally attacking the criminals!” Isaac rants. “In what world would that ever *actually* improve Gotham? I mean, *come on*.”

Stiles’ shoulders drop and he falls back. “You... You might actually have a point.”

“Yeah, see!” Isaac declares. “You being so gung-ho about Batman is what doesn’t make sense.”

“What makes you say that?” Stiles says. He’s pulling himself in tight, like he’s bracing himself.

Isaac shrugs. “Aren’t you the one who turned Peter down?”

Stiles’ features sharpen in a glare. “I thought we had an unspoken agreement to not bring that up?”

“There’s gotta be some kind of statute of limitation on unspoken agreements. Like, anything pre-ice bath sacrifice is moot,” Isaac says.

“Really, Isaac? Do you *really* wanna go there? Do you *know* what I could—”

Whatever threat Stiles is building towards gets cut short by the simultaneous beeping of their phones. Isaac grabs his and checks the

notification. It's a group text from Scott sent to Isaac, Stiles, and Kira. It simply states: **23 bodies found. Meet me at the hospital.**

The elevator doors ding open. Isaac, Stiles, Scott, and Kira rush out into the hallway. They find Sheriff Stilinski waiting for them, back on his feet and back in uniform, but sporting a cane for support.

And, just beyond Stilinski, there's a parade of body bags. Dozens of them, all wheeled towards the morgue and out of sight.

"Who found them?" Stiles asks.

"Argent," Stilinski says, slowly turning around, away from the bodies and towards the group. "And he said the Doctors were down there. He *also* said you guys might know what this thing is."

"We've got a theory," Scott says. His eyes flick towards Isaac.

"It's a slightly terrifying theory," Stiles mutters.

"Well, the M.E. said that the victims were killed somewhere else and then *dumped* in those tunnels," Stilinski explains.

Scott's eyes narrow. He looks from Stilinski over to Stiles, whispering, "Hey, what if the Dread Doctors are hiding the bodies?"

"Why would they do that?" Kira asks, head shaking in small, quick movements.

"Maybe they're covering for it," Stiles says as the realization spreads and grows between them. "Protecting it like a parent would."

"Protecting *what*?" Stilinski asks.

"A werewolf," Scott says.

All eyes turn on Isaac. He blinks and meets Stilinski head on. Locked in eye contact, he declares, "It's called the Beast."

Stilinski's expression doesn't change much, but the fractional widening of his eyes is enough. Still looking right at each other, Isaac can see the thinly veiled fear in his irises, the grave demeanor within.

"We know," Stiles says. "Horrifying."

Stilinski leans back with a sigh. His eyes take a lap around the group, landing on Stiles. “We need to figure out what we’re going to call *Parrish*,” he says. Then, turning to Scott, “Because it looks like his dream is coming true.”

Driving to school the next day, Derek says, “I’m not going to be able to pick you up later.”

“Okay,” Isaac says, mostly unfazed. “I was going to do some research in the library anyway, see if I can find anything about the Beast.”

Derek doesn’t respond. He doesn’t even nod, showing no signs of acknowledgment.

At that, Isaac starts to watch Derek a little more closely. He’s been quiet this morning. At first, Isaac hadn’t thought much of it. Though Derek has become more open and engaged in the last year, he still has his moments. He still withdraws. It’s just less frequent than the near-constant guarded state of the past. Usually, Isaac shrugs it off, but not today.

Something’s different today. Derek isn’t just quiet, he’s *nervous*. His fingers are tapping on the steering wheel and his eyes are set determinedly forward. He’s on edge. He’s hiding something.

Isaac draws in a breath. His intention is to sort through Derek’s chemosignals, but, instead, he’s met with the scent of gunpowder.

That’s when it clicks.

Vaguely, Isaac asks, “It’s tonight, isn’t it?”

Derek keeps looking forward, but there’s a hitch in his breath. There’s a stutter of surprise and that’s all the confirmation Isaac needs.

“You’re going after the Desert Wolf,” Isaac says. It’s not a question. It’s a statement of fact. It’s a realization.

Derek nods.

“Let me come,” Isaac says. The words are out of his mouth before he can think them through, but he doesn’t regret it. “I can help. I can—”

“No,” Derek interrupts. “No, you’re going to go to school, you’re going to research, and you’re going to stay out of it.”

Isaac protests. “But—”

Derek still doesn’t let him speak. “No, Isaac.”

Isaac growls, muted and faint in the back of his throat. “Why not?”

“You don’t want to help Malia kill someone,” Derek says, stern and serious and confident. He reiterates, “You don’t.”

Isaac rolls his eyes.

“I’m not letting you sacrifice your innocence for something that means nothing to you,” Derek says.

“First of all, *my innocence*? Are you kidding me, Derek? That’s—” *long since ruined* “—ridiculous. And, second of all, I’m offering to help *you*. Because you mean everything to me.”

Derek sighs. “I know that, Isaac. I know. I know you want to help protect me. I understand that, I really do, but... it’s just not worth it.”

“Why do you get to decide what’s worth it or not?” Isaac bites. He’s not sure why he’s pushing this so hard. Derek is right. He doesn’t *want* to help kill anyone. But he also doesn’t want Derek to die again.

“Because my eyes are blue,” Derek says. He flashes them for unnecessary emphasis. “I know what it is to kill someone and I know that it *stays* with you. I don’t... I don’t want that for you.”

Isaac groans. It’s a sound of defeat. It’s a giving in, it’s a letting go, it’s a, “Fine. But anything goes wrong and you call me immediately.”

Derek nods. He goes quiet again, but Isaac appreciates it. Neither one says a word for the rest of the car ride or even as Isaac steps out onto the school grounds. Neither one says a word because the stakes are too high. Saying anything would mean saying goodbye.

Isaac refuses to say goodbye to Derek.

—

Isaac and Scott walk down the hall. The air is different today. The usual chatter of students has gone hushed and silent. News of the twenty-three bodies has moved fast. Conversation has been swapped for heavy dread and stirring anxiety.

The intercom clicks on and a crackling voice announces, “By order of

the sheriff, a county-wide curfew goes into effect tonight at sundown. All after school activities are canceled until further notice. Students should go directly home at the end of the school day."

It's not just students and teachers in the hallways. There are deputies too. They're carrying guns, weapons propped against their chests as they make rounds in paired off groups. Two of them pass Scott and Isaac, walking with straight backs and intense stares.

Isaac and Scott share a nervous look.

Then, they spot Stiles down at the other end of the hall. He's talking to one of the deputies. And, as Scott and Isaac join him, they hear him say, "You don't think this is a bit much in terms of firepower for a high school?"

"Your dad's the one that issued us these things, and," the deputy – Strauss, his name tag reads – lifts the gun off his chest slightly, "he wouldn't officially say why."

Stiles pulls back, a little shocked by the revelation. Stilinski is the cautious type, but this is overkill, even for him. With all that has happened in the history of Beacon Hills, there have never been armed deputies stationed in the school. At least, not ones armed with *shotguns*. It's a horrible kind of novelty, one solidifying the strength of the coming threat.

Scott glances between Stiles and Strauss. "Did he say anything *unofficially*?"

"No," Strauss says, "but everyone's got a theory."

"What's yours?" Stiles asks with an upward flick of his chin.

"I shouldn't be talking to you guys. Don't you have class?" Strauss deflects, glancing down the hallway, like he's looking for an exit.

"Come on, Strauss," Stiles urges, though he sags a little with the initial rejection. Voice quiet, he repeats, "What's your theory?"

Strauss looks toward the other two deputies, the ones positioned at the end of the hall, the ones who aren't paying them any attention. Then, he leans in a little closer, and says, "Do you guys believe in the supernatural?"

Stiles' head juts forward and his eyes narrow. Scott's eyebrows twist

together. Isaac keeps his face purposefully blank, but he has to grit his teeth to stifle his laughter. The three of them turn inward, sharing in a collective bewilderment and stunned amusement.

“Uh–” Stiles says. “No. No, definitely not. No.”

Scott digs an elbow into his ribs. Stiles splutters and coughs. With his usual subtlety, he claps his hands together, and, “Right. Well, gotta get to class, like you said. So, okay, bye!”

Then, he turns tail and flees down the hallway, leaving Isaac and Scott alone to deal with Strauss. The deputy is following Stiles’ retreating form with his eyes. A scent of confusion and embarrassment fills the air. Isaac knows they can capitalize on that.

He leans close to Scott, stage whispering, “This is our law enforcement? Really?”

Isaac sees the way Strauss’ face falls and he feels bad about that – genuinely, he does – but they can’t afford for the public to find out the truth. Not now.

So, Isaac follows Stiles’ lead and pivots out of the conversation. He speed walks in the opposite direction, towards his own classroom, and hopes that Scott follows.

Of course, he does. He falls in line next to Isaac, joining his quick pace. Though, as soon as they round the corner, they slow and Scott says, “That wasn’t very nice.”

There’s disapproval in his voice, but, when Isaac looks at Scott, he’s smiling.

Isaac scoffs, “Yeah, well, someone had to do something after Stiles abandoned us in our time of need. I mean, seriously, doesn’t he know that you and I are useless in that kind of situation?”

Scott laughs. “Right because his,” Scott slips into a seamless impression of, “no, definitely not, no,” and back to his normal voice, “was so composed.”

“Okay, so, we’re all useless,” Isaac says, chuckling along with Scott. He shakes his head, “You know, I didn’t used to be so inept. I swear you two have dragged me down to your nerd depths.”

“I’m sorry, are you claiming that you once had the ability to socialize?

Oh, man, I would've loved to see that," Scott teases. He's smiling that sunny smile, but there's a chill to it, a lighthearted snark. "Unless you're talking about sophomore year 'I'm a little bummed about being a fugitive' Isaac because, in that case, I hate to break it to you but..."

Isaac tries to suppress a grin, looking up and away, exhaling his laughter. "You're not much better, Mr. Give Me The Finger."

"You're gonna need a better example than that," Scott says. "That's such old news."

Isaac hesitates. He thinks for a moment, sifting through memories of Scott and, then, it hits him. He immediately starts to laugh, but swallows it down, at least enough to speak through the giggles, "Then, how about... Mr. There's Another Vault?"

Scott tips his head back, like he wants to bang his skull against an invisible wall.

"What?" Isaac asks. His grin turns smug, more like a smirk. "Cat got your tongue?"

"No, I'm just – I'm running through comebacks in my head, but all the stupid things you say are too endearing to make fun of," Scott says. His smile stays genuine and pure, but his tone is a little sly, like he knows exactly what he's doing.

Now it's Isaac's turn to bash his head into an invisible force. Though, unlike Scott, he tucks his chin forward and down, as if he could hide from the flush of warmth and the burning glow of Scott's attention.

"*But*," Scott says, because apparently he's not done with Isaac yet, "if you must know, I was thinking of 'yeah, well, he doesn't trust you either.'"

Isaac's head pops up and he turns on Scott so fast he gets whiplash. "I—" he huffs. Isaac doesn't say what they're both thinking, that it might've been true then, but it definitely isn't true now. Instead, he murmurs, "That wasn't very nice."

But then, Isaac is smiling and Scott is smiling back. And, "Hey, Scott?"

"Yeah?"

Isaac bites on the edge of his grin, speaking with a sideways tilt of his mouth, "Happy birthday."

Scott lights up, like the candles on a cake, like the stars in the sky.
Like the fucking sun.

The desk behind Isaac is empty. He's starting to feel like he spends more time in this class *without* Lydia than with. (He knows that's not true, but her absence stands out in stark, disappointing contrast, like dark spots in his memory.)

Isaac hasn't given much thought to Lydia's stay at Eichen House. There have been so many distractions, but, here, in this class, with an empty desk behind him, it's impossible to be distracted. It's impossible to not think about the missing girl behind him.

And, the more Isaac thinks about it, the more anxious he becomes.

Eichen House is not a good place. Sure, Isaac has never actually been through the front door, but that hardly matters. Stiles has almost died there twice, Lydia and Malia once, and Scott and Kira had a close call too. Not to mention the people there. Maybe Malia isn't so bad and Meredith is somewhere in the gray, but Peter is still inside those walls.

There's no debate to be had: Eichen House isn't safe. Isaac doesn't have to go inside to know that. History speaks for itself.

"Okay," Mr. Yukimura welcomes, pulling Isaac up from his spiraling thoughts, "let us continue our lesson on *The Bride of the Wind*."

Isaac flips through his notebook, turning to his notes from the previous class. He skims the page, reading his purposefully neater than usual handwriting:

Kokoschka uses frantic, swirling brushstrokes to convey passion, anxiety, and stirring darkness in the painting of two lovers. The lovers lay side by side, but they are depicted in two very different ways. The woman is sleeping, eyes shut to the world and unaware of the chaos building around her. She looks healthy and peaceful despite the circumstances. The man is the opposite. He's awake, eyes staring up at the disastrous landscape of deep blue and ocean green. He looks sick and dwindling, gaunt and skeletal. He holds his lover close, just waiting for the nightmare that is no doubt about to unfold.

Isaac's pretty sure no one is actually abiding by the curfew. As far as

he's aware, Stiles is on his way to Eichen, Scott is looking for Liam, and Malia will be hunting her birth mother.

As for Isaac, he's sticking to his plan of hunkering down in the school library. They need to make some kind of dent in the research of the Beast. He'll gladly suffer a potential reprimand if progress is found.

So, Isaac slips into the library, navigating towards the Mythology & Superstitions section with familiar ease.

Except, Isaac finds that he's not alone in his endeavor. Mason stands between the shelves, tracing his thumb over the spine of a book titled, *Miraculous Healing: True Stories of Impossible Medical Cures*.

"Hey, Mason," Isaac says. He doesn't mean to sneak up on the younger teen, doesn't mean to make him jump and send the book clattering to the ground, but he does it anyway. Isaac chuckles something kind and sympathetic. He leans down to retrieve the book, holding back out to Mason. "Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

Mason shakes his head. "No, it's fine, I... I really should be paying more attention than that."

Isaac can't say he's wrong. With all that's going on around them, being on high alert isn't such a bad thing. It's exhausting and inconvenient, but Isaac doesn't mind being tired if it means staying alive.

"What are you doing here?" Isaac asks. He doesn't question the specific book, the curiosity there is plainly obvious. Rather, "Isn't there a curfew?"

Mason frowns. "You do realize that you're also here and breaking curfew, right?"

Isaac shrugs. "Yeah, but... I have claws and fangs and super senses to notice things you can't. Like," he leans in conspiratorially, dipping his volume, "were you aware you have a shadow?"

Mason turns quickly towards Isaac, then even further to the shelf behind them.

Corey materializes. Like a layer being peeled away, he steps forward and out of the cover of invisibility.

Not unlike the day in the tunnels, he looks and smells scared. He makes his appearance and then holds perfectly still, as if he's bracing

himself for an outburst or attack. He expects Isaac to be confrontational, mad, or at least annoyed.

Isaac is none of those things.

If anything, Isaac is sympathetic. Corey isn't hiding out of malice. He wasn't waiting to strike, but, rather, he's seeking answers. He's not here because of Isaac either. He's here because of Mason, because he's found some solidarity in him, because he doesn't know where else to turn.

(Isaac can relate.)

Corey has been caught spying, but he's only curious. Isaac can't imagine that Theo is the type of alpha – a generous term – who answers questions or gives explanations freely. Isaac can understand that. In fact, he understands it a little *too* well.

Isaac recognizes Corey's predicament. He recognizes that Corey has been thrown into this world of supernaturals without a manual and without a helping hand. He recognizes that Corey has been ripped out of safety. He recognizes that Corey owes his life to a morally gray leader. He recognizes that Corey feels obligated in his loyalty. He recognizes that, more than anything, Corey is scared and lost.

Isaac recognizes himself in Corey.

"Come on," he says, turning his back on Corey, but still obviously talking to him. "Grab a book, you might as well help."

Mason balks. "Wait. What?"

"We need more information on the Beast and we'll be able to cover more ground if the three of us work together," Isaac says. He stays in the logic of the explanation, keeping any traces of sympathy – or worse, pity – out of his voice.

"Even though he might just run back to Theo?" Mason questions. Though, despite his skeptical front, Isaac can't help but notice that Mason has angled his body between Corey and Isaac, like he's aiming to shield and protect the chimera.

Isaac tries not to think too much about that. He tries not to recognize anything in the movement. He tries not to recognize Scott.

Instead, he looks between the pair, from Corey to Mason and back

again. Maybe Isaac is being naive, but he won't send Corey away. He just shrugs and says, "I'm not worried about Theo."

Luckily, neither one has the super senses to hear the skip of his heart.

The research is so mind numbingly repetitive. There's only two options for potential findings. One: the book holds no reference to the Beast. Or, two: the book credits the kill to Jean Chastel, a farmer and inn-keeper, who, allegedly, slayed the Beast in 1767.

Isaac is about ready to call it quits when his phone buzzes, vibrating through the wood of the table. Isaac flips the screen, and, instantly, his heart drops into his stomach. The message is from Derek. Simple and to the point, it just reads: **Animal clinic.**

Isaac buries the memory of Lydia's one word text to Scott and the outcome that had led to. He buries the memory of the school sign shattered through the ceiling, the line of mountain ash, Scott's blood on his hands. He buries the rising tide of anxiety. It won't do him any good to dwell on the past.

Derek isn't anywhere near Theo. At least, he shouldn't have been. This is something else. This is different and Isaac can't jump to conclusions. He can only jump to his feet.

"Isaac?" Mason eases the question, calm and slow. Isaac whips around. Mason is standing at the edge of the table. He was in the bathroom for way too long, but that's beside the point now. Isaac keeps shoving things back into his bag, frantic and hurried. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes," Isaac says. Then, "I don't know." And, "Probably."

Mason moves, like he's going to grab his bag and join Isaac, like he's going to help.

"No," Isaac says without hesitation. "Stay here. It's – It's just Derek. Don't worry, I'm. I'm sure everything's fine."

"Really?" and that's Corey's voice now. "Because you seem like you're really not okay."

Mason doesn't say anything, but he nods his head towards Corey. It's an agreement. They're both watching him with nervous curiosity.

Isaac can't get them involved. He doesn't know what's waiting for him at the animal clinic. He can rope them into research, but he can't rope them into danger.

He can't.

"I'm fine," Isaac says. He steadies his voice. "I just have to go. Uh," Isaac looks at Mason. "If anything happens, find the stupidest weapon and use it. Okay?"

Mason muddles. "Um? Okay?"

That's all the confirmation Isaac can wait for. His eyes take one last lap around the table, in case he missed something, then he tears out of the library in a full on sprint.

—

Isaac runs all the way to the animal clinic. He's so high on adrenaline that he's not even out of breath. But, as he bursts through the door, he's hit with the cloying scent of wolfsbane and the metallic burn of Derek's blood. And that knocks the wind right out of him. In the blink of an eye, Isaac is doubled over and choking on nothing, on sand, on fear.

Isaac almost topples to the ground with the force of it all, but then there are steadying hands wrapped around him. And a familiar voice, saying, "Long time no see." And, "Easy, Isaac. Derek's fine. He's gonna live."

Braeden's words and touch soothe through the panic, breaking apart the mass of emotion. At least, enough that Isaac can breathe, enough that he can lift his head.

Derek is propped up, somewhere between lying and sitting, on the metal table. There are bullet holes – *plural* – decorating his torso with splotches of red and black. But his eyes are open and he's looking at Isaac.

Apology swims in the flickering of green to blue to green.

"Okay, Derek, you know the drill," Deaton says. Isaac doesn't even have it in him to be surprised by the vet's return. All he sees is the torch and the puff of flame.

Isaac steps out of Braeden's support and marches towards Derek. He

keeps his head up. He ignores everyone that isn't Derek and forces his throat to be still. He doesn't clear it or cough. He pays no mind to the grainy dryness. He focuses only on Derek. He reaches out towards him, and, voice rough, says, "Don't be a hero, Derek. Hold my hand."

Derek cracks a wobbly smile and does as he's told.

Deaton approaches with the flame. Isaac squeezes Derek's hand and his eyes shut. He turns his head away too, but it does nothing to shelter him from the remedy. Isaac knows the second the flame meets Derek's skin. Though he can't see, he can hear Derek's grunt of agony and he can feel the tightening of his already iron grip.

Isaac should maybe be worried about the safety of his fingers, but broken bones heal. He and Derek know that by now.

Derek rests his forehead on Isaac's shoulder and wheezes through the pain. Isaac tries to focus on the scent of Derek's sweat rather than burning wounds and sizzling poison. He tries to focus on the solid weight of Derek's skull rather than the sand shifting under feet and scraping against lungs. He tries to focus on the static black of closed eyes rather than bloodied hands and desert skies.

He doesn't have much success, but he stays standing and he doesn't fade away into memories, so that should count for something.

Eventually, the whirring of the torch shuts off and Derek's grinding pain goes with it. The scent of wolfsbane and blood lingers in the air, but, when Isaac takes a peek, the bullet holes are closing before his eyes. Derek's squeezing hand goes slack and loose, but he doesn't pull away.

"I thought I told you to call me immediately. Not *after* you got shot and made it to safety," Isaac whispers. It's a grumbled and half-hearted complaint.

"I know," Derek says. He sounds tired. "I'm sorry."

Isaac holds his hand a little firmer, says with a skidding heart, "I hate you."

A door creaks open, concealing Derek's answering, "-you too."

Scott and Liam stand together, on the edge of the room. They drink in the sight before them: the worn and tired shapes of Malia, Derek, Braeden, and...

Scott's eyes land on Deaton. Soft and subtle, a smile spreads across his features. Relief floods the air. Scott and Deaton's chemosignals run flush and potent, masking the painful scent of moments before. They collide in a gentle, grappling hug.

Scott's ringtone shatters the quiet peace of Beacon Hills Animal Clinic.

"Scott?" Stiles' voice comes through the speaker, frantic and harsh. He's out of breath, tone distorted, like maybe he's been crying.

"Stiles," Scott answers. "What's going on? What's wrong?"

"We have to get Lydia out of Eichen House," Stiles says. "They – They're prepping her for trepanation. They're gonna drill a hole in her head. Scott–"

"Okay, okay, Stiles, just breathe," Scott says. He's trying to stay level, but Isaac can see the rapid blinking of his eyes and the uptick of his pulse.

"There's no time to breathe, we have to – we have to, we." Stiles breaks off in a wounded noise not far from a whimper. *"They're gonna kill her."*

"No they aren't," Scott says. And, this time, the stability of his voice is real. His back is straightening and his heart is beating like it has a point to prove. "We'll break into Eichen House. We'll gather everyone we can. We'll get the security log, the blueprints of the building. *Whatever* we need, Stiles." Then, "We will save her."

And it's hard to argue with that.

Amplification

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 15

Word count: 10,063

It seems that, all at once, the stakes have risen exponentially. Theo is out there with talons that could potentially steal the Beast's power. Gerard is back like nothing ever happened. Parrish is a hellhound (Isaac's research has told him nothing of hellhounds and beasts, only hellhounds and the alleged Wild Hunt) depicted in a fresco facing off against the Beast. The Beast, who they still know shockingly little about, but continues to terrorize Beacon Hills. Like right now.

"Unit Five heading northwest on Crescent, reporting an incredibly large..."
Deputy Clarke's voice comes through the police radio of Stiles' Jeep, saying, *"Something."*

Sirens and flashing lights blare around them as they tear down the streets of Beacon Hills, following after a parade of police vehicles.

"Unit Nine to Dispatch, I think I've got eyes on the same thing. Some kind of rabid animal."

Isaac doesn't recognize who's speaking, but it's another deputy. And, by the sound of it, they're gaining on the Beast.

Stiles presses a little harder on the gas and the Jeep groans its protest, but they don't let up. The tension in the car is rising now, a collective held breath of Scott, Stiles, and Isaac.

"Unit Five to Nine, trust me: that's no animal," Clarke returns to the radio, crackling and confident in her claim.

It only gets worse from there.

"Unit Six to Dispatch, we have a situation downtown. Multiple fatalities."
Isaac is pretty sure that's Strauss speaking.

The voice of another man follows, likely someone from Dispatch, *"Copy. Medic's on the way. Do you have a perp in sight, Unit Six?"*

"Negative. Looks like a 10-91E," Strauss says. Then, *"Animal attack."*

The frantic, frenetic, frenzied energy kicks up another impossible notch. Desperate, Stiles takes action. Inadvisably, he grabs the radio and clicks on to say, “All units stay back. Do not engage. I repeat: *do not engage.*”

There’s an immediate response – static and Stilinski’s angry words of, “*Stiles, get off the radio.*”

Stiles looks between the radio, the road, and Scott in the passenger seat. His mouth is parted open in a quiet expression of shock, like he actually expected that to go well. Isaac would roll his eyes if they weren’t headed towards a sure disaster.

But then, Stilinski’s voice comes through again. Unsurprising, he reiterates Stiles’ sentiment. “*All unit alert. Wait for backup. Repeat: no one goes near this thing.*”

Even with the order put in place, there’s no relief or easing of fear. The cars don’t slow down and neither does the racing of Isaac’s heart.

Seconds later, Clarke comes through again. “*Unit Five reporting a sighting on Hill Road, southbound.*”

Then, a contradictory statement, “*Unit Nine, I’ve got it turning off Oakridge, southbound on Beachwood.*”

And another, “*All units, this is Dispatch, we’ve got a 911 call – additional sighting on Mitchell.*”

“Wait a second,” Stiles says, dots connecting in his mind, pieces coming together, “Beachwood to Mitchell?”

Isaac really wishes he spent more time driving. If he did, then maybe he would know why Stiles sounds taut with fear. He recognizes the street names, sure, but they mean nothing to him.

Scott clues him in. Breathless and quiet, “He’s headed right for the hospital.”

“Dad!” Stiles picks up the radio again, too freaked out to quell the outburst of impulse. Honestly, Isaac doesn’t blame him.

“*Stiles, get off this channel!*”

“Dad, just listen to me, okay?” Stiles pleads. “It’s headed for the hospital, all right? It’s headed for Beacon Memorial.” Volume rising,

“You hear me? It’s headed for the hospital.”

And, of course, the Beast is going to the hospital. Just like Eichen, nothing good ever happens at Beacon Memorial. Nothing.

Isaac has no idea how Stiles manages to achieve the near impossible feat, but, somehow, they make it to the hospital before the police arrive. The huge block letter signs of the building are still lit in shades of white and red, but there’s darkness inside, only flickering fluorescents to light the way. Dim, blue-tinted halls open up to them as they step cautiously through the double doors.

A gun cocks behind them.

All three boys jump to a stop, shoes squeaking against vinyl floors. Isaac spins around, readying himself for a fight, but it’s only Stilinski.

He holds up a finger, “Shh.”

Then, a bang. The ceiling above them rattles and shakes with the impact. There’s an instinctive ducking of heads. Fortunately, the entire building doesn’t come down around them (been there, done that). Unfortunately, an echoing roar follows the crash.

The Beast is here. In the hospital, on the—

“Fourth floor.”

They take the stairs up to the fourth floor. It’s even darker up here. The lights flash in a steady rhythm, alternating between total blackness and a momentary glimpse of white. It’s a disorienting switch, a back and forth activation and deactivation of Isaac’s night vision. It makes his head hurt.

The hospital is a mess. The walls are lined with sporadic flames and the floors are coated with scattered pages of medical records. It’s eerily quiet, but it’s rich with scent. Smoke and fire, like char and heat. It’s stifling and thick. It melts Isaac’s mind as he breathes it all in.

It’s the warmth that hits Isaac first. Before the light meets his eyes and the rumbling sound reaches his ears, there’s a rush of swelling fever.

It's a tangible thing, a ghost along his arms and a sweating of the air.

Then, there's a burst of orange flame and a flurry of movement. It's a body, Isaac knows. Parrish is thrown through the hall, speeding past them in a ball of fire and a rage of smoke.

The four of them stutter to a stop, just narrowly avoiding the danger as Parrish collides with a sheet covered wall. The plastic tears and melts on first contact. Parrish collapses to the ground in an extinguished form. His skin is dusted with black and, when he rolls over, there's a distinctive clawing scratch down his chest.

It's his eyes that draw Isaac's focus. They're ignited with an orange-red glow. Flame dances in his irises, but his stare is blank. The flame is alive, but Parrish's mind is not. He's somewhere else.

The light of fire fades. Parrish's eyes stay open. He's looking, but not seeing. He's empty.

Worry flutters in Isaac's lungs. He doesn't know Parrish well, but they're connected now. There's no denying it. They've bonded in a way that can't be explained from the outside looking in.

Seeing Parrish like this, it sparks fear.

Isaac takes a cautious step towards the deputy. He can sense movement behind him, knows Stilinski is following his lead, but he doesn't look back. He keeps his eyes on Parrish. (He tells himself he's scared *for* Parrish, but, deep down, he knows that's not *entirely* true.)

"Jordan? You okay?" Isaac whispers. The name still tastes weird on his tongue, but he says it anyway.

Parrish gives no sign of recognition. He doesn't even seem to have heard Isaac.

"Deputy!" Stilinski calls, a little harsher and a lot louder.

That gets Parrish's attention. He jars out of his haze, body flinching and eyes sharpening again. The transition isn't easy. It's like being forced into cold water. It's a shock to Parrish's system. His breathing comes fast and heavy, gasping and gulping. His eyes dart in every direction, searching and scared. His chemosignals catch with emotion, panicked and pained.

Isaac doesn't touch him. He can still feel the heat radiating from his

skin, but he holds a hand out, like he's trying to physically contain the situation. His voice is a muted mumbling of, "Okay, it's okay."

"Guys?" Scott says.

Isaac moves to face the sound, peering over his shoulder. Scott stands in the middle of the hallway, back turned to Parrish without a trace of doubt. Isaac presses to stand, stepping only far enough from Parrish to follow Scott's gaze.

There are bloody paw prints trailing down the hallway. One, two, three, four of them. And then, a shift.

Then, it's not paw prints. Then, it's footsteps. Then, it's a human shoe.

—

Deaton stands on one side of the metal table while Isaac, Scott, and Stiles stand on the other. He approaches with a grave sort of expression, one that spells out certain doom.

"What I'm about to show you," Deaton says, "isn't supposed to exist."

He looks between the three boys, eye contact pointed and significant. It's almost a warning. There's a paper envelope in his hand, material crinkling with quiet movement. Deaton removes the contents – a hefty stack of photos.

"This is the only surviving evidence of Dr. Valack's time as Chief Medical Officer of Eichen House." Slowly, Deaton starts laying the photos out on the table. Each one worse than the last. "To call it human experimentation would be... charitable."

Disgust tints the air.

Scott picks up one of the photos. It's a girl in a hospital gown in a hospital bed. Her hands are clamped down over her ears and her jaw is split open with a scream. Even in the still silence of the shot, there's agony.

"A banshee," Deaton notes, unnecessarily. And, "She died screaming."

The man has no tact. He just keeps placing down photos, as if they haven't seen enough already, as if they don't already know where this is going.

"So, he drilled holes into their heads?" Stiles clarifies. "All of them?"

“That was the experimentation part,” Deaton says with a sideways tilt of his head, a nod of concession.

Stiles’ eyes go dark.

“He did it to werewolves, banshees, wendigos,” Deaton lists, “any creature he could get his hands on.”

Isaac feels sick.

“Valack found that trepanation would initially heighten their powers, but to levels that couldn’t be contained,” Deaton explains.

“So, he wants to make Lydia more powerful?” Scott guesses.

And, on its own, the threat might not be such a bad thing. But, as Stiles says, “Yeah, except she’s going to end up like them.” He points to the display of horrors written across the table.

“Worse, actually,” Deaton says. Because he never comes with good news, only devastation after devastation, blow after blow. “Lydia’s abilities were already pretty exceptional to begin with,” he continues, as if they don’t already know that. “Putting a hole in her head? Will be like causing a leak in a nuclear reactor.”

Isaac’s stomach churns.

“She’ll hear everything – every death, every dying scream – all at once,” Deaton says.

Stiles falters at Isaac’s side. He twitches, like his body is seconds from giving out. Isaac inches a little closer to him. Just in case.

“That’s going to kill her,” Scott says. They already knew that too.

Deaton looks down and away. “Not only that...” his eyes flick up again, “her own dying scream,” a glance toward Stiles, “could be so powerful that it might kill everyone around her as well.”

And that’s definitely a warning.

—

Isaac points an accusatory finger at Derek, trying to pin him back down to the couch, “No, Derek, you are absolutely not coming. You were shot by not one, not two, but *five* wolfsbane bullets. You’re sitting this one out.”

Derek huffs. “So, what? You’re going to walk all the way to Scott’s house?”

“Stiles is picking me up,” Isaac says with a shrug. And, “Braeden is on her way. So, don’t even think about leaving.”

“You – You got me a babysitter?” Derek complains. He looks distressed and Isaac can hardly hold back his smirk.

“Yes,” he says. “Until you’ve proved you can be trusted, you’re staying supervised.”

“Isaac, I am a grown adult. I don’t need–”

“Oh, Stiles is here, gotta go, bye!” Isaac rambles, already pulling open the loft door and disappearing out into the hall. Derek’s protests fade out as the metal creaks and the lock resets.

Isaac knows he’s being irrational. He knows Derek can take care of himself. He knows he can *trust* Derek.

But he doesn’t trust Eichen House. And, with the way Deaton was talking last night, Isaac’s certain that, however good their plan is, something is bound to go wrong – something always does.

If Isaac can keep just *one* person out of this, if he can keep just one person safe, then he’s going to do it.

So, he’s putting his foot down and standing his ground. Derek isn’t participating. He’s going to stay here with Braeden and they can do whatever they want, just so long as it’s far away from Eichen and far outside the range of Lydia’s voice.

—

The group gathers around the island of the McCall kitchen. Isaac tries not to think about the hospital plan and Scott’s near-dead body. He tries not to remember how badly that went. It only feels like a bad omen.

This time, there’s only one laptop on the table, but there are blueprints and security logs too. On this table, is everything they could possibly need to break into Eichen House. (Hopefully.)

“There’s four steps,” Stiles says. “We get into Eichen, we get into the Closed Unit, we get Lydia, *get out*.”

“And we have to do all of this while getting past orderlies, guards, electronic door locks, and a mountain ash barrier,” Scott says. As the list drags on, the already limited optimism of the room dwindles even further.

“You have a plan for all that?” Malia says, barely a question. It’s an assumption. Or a hope, maybe.

Stiles pulls out a key card, “Stole this last night off an orderly.” His body dips to one side and he mumbles, monotone, “*But* it’s useless ‘cause they reset the codes each night.”

“So, why did you take it?” Kira asks, head shaking slightly.

“I’m getting to that,” Stiles says, mouth forming a line.

“The only way to get Lydia out of Eichen,” Scott points repeatedly at the card, “is to make that key card work again.”

“How’re you going to do that?” Liam asks.

“We’re getting to that,” Stiles repeats, holding out a hand, like an urge for patience. “Okay, just listen,” Stiles turns his laptop around for the rest to see. “I pulled all the history off the key card. Two weeks ago, there was a brownout and the security system rebooted. During a reboot, all of the key cards revert back to a default code. So, if we trigger a reboot...”

“The card goes *back* to the default code,” Liam says, catching on to the plan much more quickly this time around. “It works again.” (He smiles a little, like he’s proud of himself – smug.)

“How are we going to cause a brown out?” Kira asks. Her voice is soft and genuinely patient. She’s pushing the conversation forward, but she has trust in them and their plan.

“That’s your part,” Scott says. “You’re going to draw power from the main line. But only *enough* to cause the brownout.”

“Not a blackout,” Stiles emphasizes, hands pressed together and gestured forward.

Kira flickers with nervous confusion.

Isaac jumps in with an explanation, “If you cause a blackout, you send Eichen into a lockdown, which would be bad.”

“Very, very bad,” Stiles adds unhelpfully.

“There’s an electrical room behind the reception counter,” Scott says. He uses a marker to note the spot on the blueprint. “The main power line goes into two breakers that run power to all of Eichen.”

Kira scoffs, smiling humorlessly, “Okay, slight problem,” her head bobs in stiff and apprehensive movements, “I don’t know how to do that.”

“That’s *okay*, you–” Scott looks at Isaac, then back at Kira, “you have time to practice.”

(As always, Scott has a little bit too much faith in his friends. It’s admirable, sure, but also... a little delusional. Isaac can’t decide whether it’s a good trait or not.)

“Let’s say all this goes... perfectly,” Malia says, naturally gesticulating with one hand near the table, conveying her skepticism with subtlety. “How does a brownout get us into the Closed Unit of Eichen?”

The three not yet clued in – Kira, Liam, and Malia – seem to falter under the question. Like, the confusion has come back.

“The system takes five minutes to reboot. In that five minutes, all the alarms will be turned off,” Stiles explains. He drags a hand down through the air, a vertical movement to demonstrate, “The key card *should* work.”

Isaac can’t help but notice that Stiles doesn’t sound as animated as he usually does. He’s trying to rally behind the plan, the one he worked so hard to streamline, but the anxiety is getting to him. Before, even when the chips were down, Stiles still had a morbid sort of excitement. Now, though, he’s bleak.

Nobody else seems to be paying attention to the change in Stiles’ demeanor. Or, maybe, they’re just not surprised by it. After all, it is Lydia that they’re talking about here. *Of course*, Stiles is going to be going out of his mind with worry. *Of course*, he’s not going to rest until she’s safe.

“Liam,” Scott addresses. “You, me, and Isaac get Stiles to the gate of the Closed Unit.” He glances at Stiles, something nervous in his eyes. “But, after that, he has to go on his own. We can’t get past the mountain ash barrier.”

And, maybe, that's part of Stiles' fear. The crux of the plan, the most important part, it all comes down to him. He's going to have to do it alone.

(Isaac hates that. A lot.)

"And when we're gone," Scott says with an exhale of breath, "all anyone's going to think is that there was a reboot of the security system caused by a brownout."

Isaac, Scott, and Stiles stand straight to face the others. The plan is laid out now, ready for judgment and critique.

"Uhh, any questions?" Stiles asks. It's a mistake.

All at once, they're hit with three rapid fire questions, each one an indicator of the person asking.

Liam: on board, but wary. His eyebrows twist with, "How do we get into Eichen House in the first place?"

Malia: pessimistic in nature. She doesn't let them answer, just comes in strong, "What's our worst case scenario?"

Kira: insecure and uncertain. She blurts, "What if I can't do it?"

"Okay, admittedly, a lot could go wrong," Stiles concedes. There's an unspoken, *but*. A wordless, *we have to do this*.

Even if all the signs are suggesting they should, Stiles won't give up. He blames himself for Lydia getting hurt, just as he blames himself for everything, and he won't stop until she's back at their sides – at *his* side.

"*Everything* could go wrong," Liam counters, nodding emphatically. He's not being cruel. He's just being honest.

"Guys," Scott cuts in, "if we *don't* do this, we *lose* Lydia. Sh-She's going to die in there tonight. And she might take a lot of innocent people with her."

They've done this before. Over and over, they've stood around just like this, and they've saved countless lives. Sometimes strangers and sometimes friends, but this...

This is Lydia. They can't do this without her.

—

There's a dead body in the morgue. Sure, that's where dead bodies are *supposed* to be. But... Isaac thought they would have at least been moved to the freezer drawers. He tries not to look at it and he tries not to breathe in too deep – doesn't want to face the smell.

(Which, isn't that fun? That this is just a part of Isaac's life? The smell of death?)

Melissa has to reach over the body to get to them, but she retrieves a stack of folded body bags. She walks to the other side of the morgue, away from the body and over to where Isaac, Scott, and Liam are standing.

Liam is in her direct path. And, as she approaches, he holds out his arms to take the bags.

Melissa pivots at the last moment. The bags go to Scott instead.

There's no subtlety. It's a pointed move, leaving Liam standing there with his arms outstretched and a hurt look in his eyes.

"Just promise you're not coming back in one of these," Melissa says. She doesn't let go of the bags yet and she doesn't turn away from Scott. She's speaking mostly to him, but her attention flicks to Isaac for a brief second.

It's a flash of eye contact, a momentary connection, a silent, *that goes for you too*.

"We're coming back with Lydia," Scott says. He speaks with a calm kind of certainty, meeting his mom with an almost promise. (He can't say the words, can't risk breaking them. But he can look her in the eye and give her his determination.)

Melissa nods. Isaac can tell she's apprehensive, but she drops her gaze to the bags. She whispers, "okay," and lets go. She leaves the first stack of bags with Scott and backs up and away.

"We still don't know who's actually doing this," Liam says. And, when Isaac and Scott glance his way, they see him staring at the body. Unnecessarily, he clarifies, "Who the Beast is."

"We'll find out," Scott says. He sounds certain about that too.

He's probably right. A reveal is inevitable in a situation like this. The question is: *how many more innocent people are going to die before then?* And: *will it be too late to save the teenager underneath?*

"You think it's someone we know?" Liam asks.

"I hope not," Scott says, voice half breath.

Hope only gets you so far. They can hope and pray and beg for a stranger, but, in the end, reality is cruel and merciless. In the end, it could be their best friend.

Isaac tries not to think about Void Stiles and the nogitsune. He *tries*, but the similarities are so apparent. He wants to turn a blind eye to it all, but, here, in the hospital, the fluorescent light of truth is impossible to ignore.

"You think he even knows he's doing it?" Liam questions.

Stiles knew. He figured it out – like he does everything else. And, just the same as always, no one listened to him.

Melissa returns with a second stack of body bags. "How are you so sure it's a he?"

The bags get thrown roughly into Liam's arms. They're not heavy, but the sudden impact brings a soft grunt to his throat.

"You still mad at me?" Liam asks. He's looking up at Melissa with those hurt eyes and apologetic brows.

"No," Melissa exhales, shaking her head. She's not lying, per say, but she's not wholly honest either. She's not mad, but she's not forgiving. She leans in closer to Liam, voice pitched low and dangerous, "But, if you try to kill my son again, I'll put you in one of these myself."

Isaac doesn't doubt Melissa's ability or willingness to follow through with the threat. She can be scary when she wants to be. Her love for Scott is a fierce thing, a protectiveness so entwined with her being, an inseparable part of her.

Scott's eyebrows lift and, when he turns over his shoulder to look at Liam, he almost seems impressed.

Liam whispers, "She's still mad."

Scott's nose scrunches and his mouth turns down at the corners. He

nods in a near-wince of, “*Oh, yeah.*”

Isaac gets it – he really does. He understands Melissa’s cold shoulder. He understands why she can’t see Liam the same way anymore. He understands why she has her guard up.

It’s a complicated affair, but, as it stands, Isaac isn’t mad at Liam. He forgives him too. In fact, Isaac’s not sure he was ever mad *at* Liam.

Maybe it’s the fact that Isaac’s been through something like this before. With Allison, when her mom died and she succumbed to the darkness within. When she tried to kill Derek, when she captured Erica and Boyd, when she stabbed Isaac with ring daggers.

There was manipulation there too. With Gerard’s voice in her head and grief in her bones, Allison got swept away in the tide. She had been harsh and scathing. She had been cruel and merciless.

But Isaac hadn’t stayed mad at Allison for long. Like with Liam, Isaac’s not sure if he ever was angry. He wasn’t close enough to Allison before, didn’t have a connection to feel betrayed by. It felt impersonal, like it wasn’t about him. So, when Scott forgave her, Isaac followed his lead.

Maybe it’s the same with Liam. Maybe Scott has forgiven him, so Isaac can too.

Or maybe it’s the fact that Isaac had his own spell of darkness and grief. With Erica and Boyd, when they died and he couldn’t see past the twins and their role in it all. When all he cared about was getting a fire going, was killing, was vengeance.

The manipulation there was different. With the fly in his skin and void in his soul, Isaac got wrapped up in hatred. He had been harsh, scathing, cruel, merciless.

And, sure, that was under the lull of the nogitsune. But those feelings weren’t made. They came from somewhere within Isaac. They were amplified and distorted. Part of that was him.

Isaac knows what grief does. It’s messy and putrid. It’s poison. It twists you up and clots your veins until there’s no give, until you’re only stuck and trapped.

Maybe that’s what happened to Liam. Maybe that’s why he attacked, and maybe that’s why Isaac can move on so easily. Because he’s been

there. Because it's only fair.

Or maybe it's the fact that it's Liam. Liam, who is all sharp edges and rough surfaces, but, underneath, he's something soft. Underneath, Liam is kind. He's strong and powerful, but he's sympathetic too. He cares, less loudly than Scott, but, still, he cares.

Maybe the reason doesn't matter. Whatever it is, Isaac holds no resentment towards Liam. He's not mad. And he's not *forgiving* because he never *blamed* Liam.

It was never his fault. It was all Theo.

—

"That's the worst plan I've ever heard." Parrish slides the keys back through the plexiglass divider.

"Okay, the plan is *perfect*, and it will work *perfectly*, especially if you agree to drive the van," Stiles rants and rambles, punctuating his overconfidence with a push of the keys. The metal jingles together, passing back to Parrish's side of the desk.

"Is the sheriff on board with this?" Parrish questions.

Stiles' mouth is parted open and he tilts his head back, like he's offended by the insinuation. "How do you think I got the keys?"

"I thought you *stole* them," Parrish says, unapologetic.

"While that's a perfectly reasonable assumption, I did *not* steal them," Stiles says. His tone has shifted into something more dull and relaxed.

Isaac's not sure what he's aiming for. Irritation, maybe. Or something affronted, like he's trying to tug at Parrish's conscience.

Regardless, it doesn't really work. Parrish stays with that same incredulous expression.

So, Isaac jumps in, "We need you because all of the Eichen guards know all of the Sheriff's Deputies. We need a *real* deputy, and one who *won't* ask questions."

"It's not safe to bring me along," Parrish counters, voice a hiss of volume. There's an urgent undertone in, "I'm dangerous."

Isaac and Stiles share a look. It's unimpressed at best.

“So is the giant murdering werewolf that’s killed over thirty people, but, somehow, didn’t kill you,” Stiles returns, whispering all in one breath. He smiles a closed-lip grin, gesturing towards Parrish, like, *you can’t argue with that*.

Isaac is ready to say more – words of Lydia and that fact that Parrish hasn’t hurt anyone yet – but he doesn’t need to.

Parrish looks down at the keys, considering. Then, he grabs them and walks away.

Success.

—

Stiles is driving them to the school library. The radio is on in the Jeep, but Stiles is completely silent. He isn’t drumming on the wheel or humming along.

Isaac shouldn’t miss the noise, but he does. The Jeep is full of sounds — the radio, the air con, the grinding engine. But it feels stifling without Stiles joining the mix, without him leading the chorus.

“It’s going to work,” Isaac says when he can’t take it anymore.

Stiles flinches. He tries to hide the little jump, tries to keep his eyes forward. He tries not to acknowledge Isaac at all, but he hears him and he’s affected. That’s obvious to the both of them.

“I mean, it’s *Lydia*,” Isaac continues. “How many times have the odds been stacked against her like this? And yet, she’s still here.”

Stiles says. “Yeah, barely.” Then, “You haven’t seen her, Isaac. Even if everything goes to plan, which we both know it won’t, she’s... she’s still not okay.”

Isaac nods. “But she’s *alive* and we still have time. We’re going to save her.”

“But what if this is the one thing she can’t come back from? You said it, she – she’s been in these situations before. What if, this time, her luck runs out?” Stiles asks. He sounds so worn down. *Hopeless*.

“We can’t think like that,” Isaac says. “If this is going to work, then we all have to *believe*.”

Stiles groans. “You sound like Deaton.”

Isaac's mouth drops open and he makes an insulted sound. "Um, *rude.*"

Stiles smiles. It's a small thing, but it's there. Then, "You really believe we can do this?"

Isaac shrugs. "We don't have a choice."

There's no alternative. They could go home and give up and do nothing. They could return to everyday life. They could, but they can't. That's not an option. This *has* to work. They *have* to save her.

Besides, Isaac doesn't feel like doing any homework.

—

"My dad's got the lab working on the shoe prints, but, uh," Stiles rambles as the three of them – Isaac, Scott, Stiles – trail down the library steps, "we're both kind of mystified about how giant werewolf feet turn back into a pair of sneakers."

"Argent said it'd be unlike anything we've ever seen before," Scott explains.

"Did he say it was going to defy the laws of physics?" Stiles bites, incredulous and sarcastic. He flashes Scott a look, one that reads with the same feelings.

They round the corner into the Mythology & Superstitions section, but come to a screeching stop when they find the row isn't empty. Theo Raeken stands there, forcing casual in a lean against the shelf with a book propped open in his arms.

"What are you doing here?" Scott asks.

Here. Meaning: the library. Meaning: the place where Theo killed Scott.

Isaac curls his hands into fists. He swallows his rising anger and focuses on keeping his heart steady. This isn't the time or the place. He bristles, but he doesn't let it show. He lets his hands fall slack. He keeps his expression blank. He won't let Theo know he's getting to him. He won't give him that satisfaction.

Theo presses up off the shelf. He turns to face them, turning a page of the book without looking down. There's a slight smirk on his features,

a glint of something dark. He speaks like he's done nothing wrong, like they don't have scars from the sting of his betrayal. "I still need to graduate."

"No, no. What you *need* is to be *beaten*," Stiles says without hesitation. "*Severely*. With a pipe," he just keeps going, "wrapped in barbed wire—"

"Okay, I admit that mistakes were made," Theo interrupts. He hangs his head, like a learned show of guilt. It's observed and reacted. It's a mimicry of something real.

"Murders," Stiles corrects. "Some *murders* were made."

Isaac fucking loves Stiles.

Theo ignores the words. He returns his eyes to the pages of the book, prompting, "You know how the Soviets helped us win World War II?"

Isaac spares a bewildered look towards Scott and Stiles. Scott keeps his attention trained on Theo, like he's terrified to let him out of his sight, like he's barely listening with the intensity of his observation. Stiles, however, does look at Isaac. They meet with that collective confusion, that question of, *is this guy for real?*

"They knew how to make it through a Russian winter," Theo says.

Isaac isn't impressed. And neither is Stiles.

"Is that it? Okay. Thank you, Theo. Very informative," Stiles complains, pivoting to walk away. He's trying to escape the conversation. His honest discomfort isn't lost on Isaac.

Once again, Theo ignores him.

"If you're planning to break Lydia out of Eichen House, you still need to get past the mountain ash." He's once again speaking more to Scott than anyone else. As if he actually believes he can get through to him, as if he hasn't thoroughly burned that bridge. Or pushed Scott off it. Either metaphor works. "We can make it through. You can't, Scott."

"What do you really want?" Scott asks. There's no patience in his voice. He's not even giving Theo an inch.

(Isaac is a little bit proud of him, but that feels silly to admit, even to his own mind.)

"I know you saw the fresco," Theo says.

Isaac hasn't seen it. Not up close, at least, but Scott did send him a picture. Isaac has considered showing it to Mr. Yukimura, hoping to gain insight from the brushstrokes and color choices, but that felt silly too.

"Two seriously pissed off creatures, the hellhound and the Beast, fighting over a pile of dead bodies. I don't want to be one of the bodies. It's that simple," Theo continues. He dips into something dangerously low – a warning or a threat. "I can get you to Lydia."

Scott tilts his chin and flicks his eyebrows up. It's a move that means, *is that so?*

Theo closes the book. He gestures out with a shrug, like he has no preference in the matter, "Or we can see who gets to her first."

Then, Theo returns the book to the shelf – in the wrong spot, Isaac notices – and exits the library without another word.

"There's no way he knows what Valack's doing. Why's he so interested in her?" Stiles says, volume quiet like the space requires.

Isaac doesn't look at him yet. He keeps staring in the direction Theo left. He can barely see him anymore, but he won't turn his back on Theo. He won't. Not again.

"H-He probably thinks what we're *all* thinking," Scott says, "that Lydia's got something bigger to do with this." Isaac still doesn't look at him, but he can hear the build in his voice, the lead up to, "That maybe she's the only one who can actually save us."

There's no clues, no evidence beyond Valack's interest. But it's true. They've all come to the conclusion, they all have the same feeling. That if they don't get Lydia out of there tonight, if she dies, then it's only a matter of time before the rest of them follow.

With that in mind, Isaac turns back around. He faces Scott and Stiles dead on. He braces himself for a reaction, and says, "If we know Theo is going to show up at Eichen tonight... shouldn't we be trying to prevent it? Shouldn't we – Shouldn't we try to stop him from getting in the way?"

Scott and Stiles share a look. Silent communication passes between them, but Isaac doesn't feel left out. He just feels grateful that they

seem to be, at the very least, considering his opinion.

Eventually, Stiles says, “We... We can’t afford to mess with the plan. It’s already fragile enough as it is.”

Isaac frowns. “Well, but that – that’s my point. If Theo shows up, he’s *going* to mess things up.”

Stiles nods. It seems like, maybe, that’s a risk he’s willing to take. Isaac’s not on the same page.

“Listen,” Isaac says. He stays calm and level headed, trying to convey that this isn’t about anger or vengeance. This is about Lydia. “Once we get to the Closed Unit, there’s very little Scott, Liam, or I can do. Right? We’re just supposed to wait for you and keep back any guards that come our way. If... If one of us didn’t do that, if just one of us was waiting for Theo, how – how bad could that be?”

There’s another look between Scott and Stiles. This time, Stiles shrugs, like a relinquishing of control. He’s giving Scott the final say.

After a full minute of silence, he gives in with, “Liam and I will get Stiles to the Closed Unit. And, Isaac, you can wait around the other side.”

Oh.

Isaac... Isaac wasn’t expecting to be given the task. He just wanted someone to do it. He assumed it would be Scott. He–

“Okay,” Isaac agrees.

It’s a show of trust. Scott trusts Isaac’s opinion – he *values* it – enough to adjust the plan. He trusts Isaac to do this on his own. He trusts Isaac to take care of himself. He trusts Isaac to keep his emotions in check, to pull back, to not go too far.

Scott trusts Isaac.

—

Back at the McCall house, the pack reconvenes. For a while, it’s just the boys hanging out, waiting around without much to do. But, eventually, Malia and Kira join them. They come bearing some not so good news.

“She took out the whole school?” Scott repeats, unable to keep the

mix of surprise and disappointment from his words.

“She took out the whole *grid*,” Malia clarifies. Her eyes are wide in an almost frantic way and she speaks through her teeth.

Kira sighs. Her eyes flutter closed and her hands jump at her sides, “Look, I failed every single practice try.” She shakes her head. (Scott looks back at the others – at Isaac.) “This isn’t going to work.”

“How far can we get without the brownout?” Liam asks.

Isaac knows what he’s doing. He’s trying to adapt and accommodate, to keep their delicate hope alive. But, what Liam doesn’t realize, what the plan makers know, is that, without the brownout, the furthest they can get is, “The front door.”

“We’re going,” Scott declares, cutting over Stiles’ pessimism. (*Realism*, Isaac’s mind corrects.)

“Scott,” Kira levels, “we went through *boxes* of lightbulbs.”

Scott staggers forward, closer to Kira, “It doesn’t matter.” He’s determined. “You can do this.”

There’s that unending faith.

“The key card won’t work unless there’s a reboot and there’s no reboot without a brownout,” Kira rambles.

Everything she’s saying is true and worrisome, but it’s like arguing with a brick wall. Scott isn’t as stubborn as some of the other pack members (read: Stiles), but he’s strong-willed where it counts – where his friends are involved.

“I know you can do this,” Scott reiterates. His loyalty is unshakeable. He looks around at the rest of the group, testing, “Anyone here think she can’t?”

Isaac sighs. He really wishes Scott didn’t have so much influence on him. Like, really, it’s ridiculous how easily he gives. He sways, “What is it that Lydia says? ‘You can do it Kira, be a vixen?’”

Stiles snorts a laugh. “I’m not sure that really applies here, but, yeah, same. I’m the one that put you in the plan. So.”

Liam’s voice comes next, a slightly less believable, “I totally think you can do it.”

The pack turns on Malia. She's the last one left to give her support. Though, by the looks of it, she had no intention of doing so.

"What?" she questions, a little rhetorical. Her eyes loop around the group, but mostly stay on Stiles.

"*I believe in you too, Kira,*" Stiles whispers his cue, body bending in an unnatural angle towards Malia.

"I'm the one who's going to be locked in an electrical room with her," Malia protests. Which, you know, *fair*.

Stiles raises his eyebrows at her, giving an unimpressed sort of shake of his head. (Isaac thinks maybe there should be tension between them, but there isn't. Apparently, breakups don't really hold the same weight when one of you is a werecoyote and the other is your anchor. Or when one of you is a previously possessed human and the other is the name that brought you back from the fray.)

Malia's shoulders sag. Her eyes are still a little too wide to be natural, but under Stiles' pointed gaze, she turns to Kira. Half-hearted at best, but meaningful nonetheless, she says, "Y-You can do it."

Malia sighs, like that was the worst thing she's ever experienced. As she faces forward again, she glares at Stiles a little, but it's lacking heat. And, when Isaac glances at the man in question, there's a softness in his eyes.

The whole thing makes Isaac a little sad to witness.

"You guys are all crazy," Kira says, moving in quick jerks of her head. She exhales, "We're gonna die."

But, despite her lingering uncertainty, Kira doesn't argue any further. The plan is put back into motion.

—

Isaac clearly didn't think this part of the plan through. If he did, he would've realized that getting into a body bag isn't something he wants to do. Not in the least bit.

Briefly, Isaac wonders if Scott and Stiles considered this. Briefly, he wonders if they've been waiting for him to panic. Briefly, he wonders how they ever thought this was going to work.

There's a hand cupping Isaac's shoulder. The touch is gentle, but sudden. Still, Isaac doesn't flinch. He knows it's Scott. He knows without looking. He knows by the beat of his heart and the weight of his hand. He knows *because* he doesn't jump. His body reacts – or, technically, *doesn't* react – before his mind can make the connection.

It's distinctly embarrassing. Isaac's feelings run bone deep, past ingrained survival instincts and reflexive fear.

And that thought... it's like a switch in Isaac's mind. His love for Scott is stronger than his fear. That, in and of itself, is terrifying. But, at the same time, it's a calming presence, just like Scott's hand on his shoulder.

"It's just a ten minute drive," Scott says. "You can handle ten minutes. Yeah?"

Isaac appreciates the lack of empty words. Scott doesn't say, *it's going to be okay*. Or, *you're going to be fine*. Because he knows Isaac won't be. He won't be okay and he won't be fine. He'll be spiraling and scared, but ten minutes is nothing.

"Yeah," Isaac says. "I can handle it."

Ten minutes is worth it for Lydia.

—

The car bumps and vibrates under Isaac. It knocks him against the plastic of his confinement and into the shoulder on his left side. Isaac is pretty sure it's Stiles, but he's not certain.

Regardless of the doubt, Isaac tells himself that it is. That it's that same brush of contact, that brush of arm against arm.

Isaac grounds himself in the touch. He keeps his eyes and fists squeezed shut. He lets ring dagger blades dig into the skin of his palms, not enough to bleed, but enough to feel the threat of it. He lets pain keep him human.

No one tells you how long ten minutes feels when you're miserable. The seconds creep and crawl along at an ungodly pace. Isaac feels on the edge of control. He feels itchy and squirmy and he wants to break free.

He could. So, so easily. He could rip through this plastic in a

heartbeat. But he can't risk the plan.

And, as the seconds drag into minutes, Isaac can't let his suffering go to waste. He's already made it this far. If he lashes out now, he'll have instant gratification, but at what cost?

This hell will be for nothing. So, he stays perfectly still.

It's killing Isaac that he doesn't know how long it's been. He can't see outside. He doesn't know how close or far away they are. He can't tell how much time is left, how much more suffering he has to endure.

If he just knew, if he just had some idea, then maybe he could hold on a little better. Maybe he could find some motivation in the just of it all – in *just* a few more minutes, in *just* a few more miles.

Isaac starts to count.

One... two... three... four... five...

And so on and so forth.

—

Isaac is up to four minutes and twenty-six seconds when the car rumbles and the brakes squeak with a stop. He hears the window roll down and then Parrish's voice saying, "*Delivery to the morgue.*"

Isaac has no idea how long they had been driving before he started counting. He has no idea if his seconds were accurate or sped up or slowed down. He has no idea, but he knows that it's helping.

So, Isaac drowns out the conversation and continues.

Twenty-seven... twenty-eight... twenty-nine... thirty... thirty-one...

Isaac makes it another forty seconds before the back doors open and he loses his place. The numbers slip away and awareness comes rushing back.

"I'll need to log the names off the toe tags."

Isaac doesn't recognize the voice, so that must be the Eichen guard speaking. He's gruff and firm in his tone. It sends a chill down Isaac's spine, a shiver that wants to wrack through and shake his core.

But Isaac can't give into it. He can't move without exposing them.

“There’s significant decomp. They were found in the county tunnels way past rigor.”

Isaac lets the blades cut through, lets them prick into his skin. He breathes in the scent of blood. He lets it dry him out and flood his mind. He lets it draw his focus.

“Open them up, please.”

There’s hesitation, then a zipper, then the suffocating scent of death. It overpowers Isaac’s blood in seconds. It makes his eyes water and his throat constricts against the urge to gag.

Another pause.

Isaac feels movement above him. His body bag shifts as Parrish’s hands come near the zipper. He pulls it down by an inch. There’s a puff of fresh air and freedom and relief. And then...

“No, no. Go, just go.”

The zipper pulls escape right out from under Isaac. The bag closes with that familiar, harsh hiss. The air constricts and the relief runs dry.

It’s cruel and it’s too much.

Isaac clenches his teeth so hard he’s scared they might crack. He thinks of Derek. He thinks of Scott. He thinks of Lydia. He breathes a little more loudly than should be safe. His ten minute window burns down to embers.

The van door slams shut and silent tears run down Isaac’s cheeks.

—

Isaac breaks out of the body bag without ceremony. He tries not to rip it, but he also doesn’t really care. He tears through the zipper and bursts free like he was drowning. He pants and gulps down air. He drops ring daggers to the table and clenches bloodied hands over his knees. He closes his eyes and tips his head back in relief.

Isaac’s disarray goes mostly unnoticed, covered by Stiles’ own display. “Oh my god,” he’s gasping too, but it’s less genuine than Isaac, more for show. “Never again.”

Then, he falls off the table trying to get his legs free.

It's enough commotion to draw Liam's attention. He's making fun of Stiles, laughing at him in that teasingly exasperated way, that current of feeling that always runs between the pair.

It's enough to draw in Liam, but not Scott.

He's at Isaac's side in an instant. Cautiously, he extends steadying hands, helping Isaac get down with more grace than Stiles. Then, he wipes the tear tracks from Isaac's face.

It's uniquely intimate. It's because of the blood on Isaac's hands.

"You okay?" Scott whispers.

Isaac nods. "Yeah."

It's probably not true, but there's no time for anything else. Isaac has to be okay and they have to keep moving.

Scott must hear the half-lie, but he lets it pass without protest. Instead, he looks around the morgue in almost frantic flicks of his eyes. Isaac doesn't follow his gaze, just stays watching him. Then, Scott finds what he's searching for.

He grabs a roll of paper towels and rips off a section for Isaac. He practically cleans Isaac's hands for him. And then he cleans off the daggers too. It's unnecessarily kind. It makes Isaac's heart yearn in a nearly uncomfortable way.

Scott balls up the paper towel and throws it to the trash with an accuracy that shouldn't be impressive. (It is anyway. Isaac is easy like that.)

Stiles and Liam join them then. They crowd around in a little circle. Stiles has his phone out, showing off a clock that hasn't stopped for Isaac's recovery. It just keeps pressing forward.

"Fifteen minutes," Stiles says. "Starting now."

They press forward too.

—

The fifteen minutes goes much faster than the ten.

Isaac is antsy in his waiting. He hides out near the second entrance to the Closed Unit, just behind a corner and out of sight from passersby.

(He can't attack Theo's pack outside or in the lobby. If he does, he'll draw unnecessary attention and potentially clue security into their infiltration. It's a risk he isn't willing to take.)

Time passes fast. The minutes tick by.

Isaac's nerves are really kicking in now. There's so much that could go wrong. There's so much that could have already happened. And Isaac would be none the wiser. He's too far away from the rest of the group to really be involved. He's too isolated.

This was so dumb. He should have kept his stupid ideas to himself. Isaac should be with Scott and Liam. He shouldn't be waiting here by himself, in the figurative dark, with no idea what's coming for him.

Then, for a blink, the darkness becomes literal too.

Overhead, the lights flicker. There's a shock of voltage, a humming whirl of the transformer.

The electricity stays steady.

Kira did it. The reboot has begun. Five minutes.

—

Isaac hears footsteps.

The chimera pack comes into view – Theo, Tracy, and Josh. They march down the hallway, an air of infuriating superiority spins around them, bolstered by the arrogance of the makeshift alpha leading the charge.

The petty side of Isaac wants to swing at Theo, but the logical side knows better.

Isaac has thought this part of the plan through. He's calculated the strengths and weaknesses of the chimera pack, he's weighed them against each other, he's strategized.

He has to take Tracy out first. At this rate, they have maybe three minutes before the end of the reboot. Isaac can't afford to be paralyzed for hours.

And so, he waits until the chimeras have passed him, then he comes at Tracy. Isaac stabs twin ring daggers into her shoulder blades. (Isaac remembers how that felt. He doesn't feel as sorry as he maybe should,

doesn't feel that same kinship with Tracy, not like before.)

The half-kanima doubles forward. A snarling growl builds behind razor teeth. She starts to spin around, Theo and Josh doing the same, but they're not quick enough. Isaac has the element of surprise and a plan stacked high behind him. He has the advantage and he uses it.

Before Tracy can launch a counterattack, before she can get Isaac in her sights, he slams her into the wall. Her head meets stone and she collapses to the ground. Immediately, she goes unconscious.

Step one? Check.

Isaac didn't just analyze the chimeras' strengths and weaknesses. He analyzed his own too. Isaac knows where his vulnerabilities lie. He knows he has to disable Josh next. He can't afford to get electrocuted either.

That's why he has the ring daggers with him. With Tracy and with Josh, it gives him distance. It allows him a greater chance to keep them at bay, to keep away from venom-laced tails and electric-charged claws.

And, luckily for Isaac, Theo is a bit of a coward. He's built his pack up like guard dogs. He's letting them do his dirty work for him, just as Isaac expected.

History repeating.

So, Isaac doesn't have to lunge at Josh. The chimera comes at him all on his own. He stomps forward, claws and fangs hissing and crackling with warning, but Isaac is ready for him.

Isaac slashes his daggers down Josh's chest. It's a sequence of movement. It starts just below his pectoral muscles, a drag from the outside in. Then, a brief reprieve and a twisting of his grip, a slice from the inside out. It's a burst of blood and pain.

Josh throws his claws out in a haphazard swing, but Isaac ducks under his arm. With the dagger still firm in his hold, giving an iron weight to his fist, Isaac punches into Josh's stomach.

Just like Tracy, he caves in. Josh tips forward, hunching in on himself, landing hands on knees. He's not down for the count, but it will take him a few seconds to recover.

Step two? Check.

Isaac turns his back to Josh and narrows in on Theo. This is his biggest risk. If Josh gets up quicker than Isaac anticipated, if the two chimeras come at him from either side, then it might be game over.

But it's the only plan Isaac could see.

His only other option would be to keep his sights set on Josh, to make sure he can't get up again. But that would require turning his back to Theo, that would mean giving him a chance to sneak past the mountain ash.

Isaac can't let that happen.

So, he spins daggers around his fingers and glows yellow eyes. He's starting towards Theo, he's preparing for the final blow, he's closing in.

Step three? Ch—

Corey materializes out of the wall.

Isaac's not sure what the boy is aiming to do, but he jumps into the fight. Corey gets between Isaac and Theo. He's running forward, like maybe he's going to try to land a punch. He's seeing his *alpha* in danger and he's stepping in despite himself.

History repeating.

Isaac doesn't let Corey hit him, but he doesn't jab the daggers into his skin either. He could. He really, really could. Corey is too close and too foolhardy. It's hesitation and impulsion rolled into one, it's a messy movement, but Isaac doesn't take the advantage.

Isaac pushes Corey into the wall. He pins him down with a forearm pressing below collarbones. It keeps him from lashing out, but it's not meant to hurt. It's meant to contain and go no further.

In all of his calculations, Isaac never expected Corey to be here. And that's his own mistake. He saw himself in Corey and forgot what that meant, forgot the loyalty that comes with an insecure teen and an overbearing, life-saving authority figure.

"Corey," Isaac warns, but his voice isn't angry or dark. There's kindness in his inflection and in what he says next, "You don't have to

do this. You don't owe Theo anything."

Corey's eyes flicker with emotion. Isaac knows that look. It's doubt, it's resolution, it's, *you don't understand*.

The thing is: Isaac does understand. He's *been* Corey. He's been the scared kid with nowhere else to go and no one else to turn to. He's been the kid so blinded by escape – by the desperation to stay free from the haunting pain – that he ends up running right back into the arms of the ghost.

Isaac has been Corey. He understands. He empathizes.

"You don't want to do this," Isaac says. Stronger still, "I know you don't." Again, whispered and a little wet, "*You don't*."

There's a cold laugh.

"Careful, Corey." Theo's voice comes from within the Closed Unit, from the other side of the mountain ash, from where Isaac can't touch him. "You don't want to get too close to this one. He's... cursed. Everyone around him ends up dead." Theo smiles that sneering darkness. And, "Isn't that right, Isaac?"

Isaac loosens his hold on Corey.

He doesn't mean to do it. It's just that Theo's words strike a chord, and then it's too late. Isaac falters and Corey slips free.

Isaac could probably grab him, could probably throw a well aimed dagger, but he doesn't. Corey crosses over the mountain ash and Theo smirks something wicked and sharp.

Isaac meets Corey's eyes. The flickering feeling is there again, but it's charged with something else now. It's surprise, it's confusion, it's, *why do you care about me?*

It's history repeating.

—

Isaac drags Tracy's body to a supply closet at the end of the hall. He leaves the door open a crack. He could close and lock it, but he doesn't. His stomach churns at the thought and it's just not worth it.

Isaac has a pretty good feeling about what's going to happen next. Theo is going to take his cronies through to find Lydia, he's going to

fail, and he's not going to come back for Tracy. It'll be up to her to find her own way out of Eichen House, a feat difficult enough without a closet to break out of.

There's a sting of failure in letting three of the chimeras get through to the Closed Unit, but Isaac knows he did the right thing. If Isaac is correct in his assumptions, then all Corey knows is indifference and cruelty. If Isaac is correct, then his words and his restraint will stick with him. If Isaac is correct, then his kindness will leave a mark.

Besides, it's not a *complete* failure. Isaac still managed to remove Tracy from the mix. He still stalled them for longer than three minutes. It might just be enough. He hopes that it is.

—

Isaac returns to the morgue. The reboot is over and it's been more than fifteen minutes. The others should be back by now, and yet, the room is empty and abandoned.

It's not difficult to realize what happened. Somewhere along the way, the plan went to shit.

Isaac could stay here and wait for the others, but he's tired of waiting. He's tired of not knowing what's going on.

So, he takes the risk and ventures out into the hallway. He makes his way towards the opposite side of the Closed Unit, where Scott and Liam were supposed to be stationed.

Isaac hears the fight before he sees it. He hears buzzing electricity and screams of pain. He hears slamming fists and labored breaths. He hears a roar.

Scott.

His howl echoes ricochets off walls and burns past Isaac's ear. It sparks something primal in Isaac. It's a searing *need* to protect. It's an instinct engraved and buried deep. It sends Isaac sprinting around corners, feet slapping against stone floor hard enough to shoot pain up his legs. It sends Isaac into a frenzy, tunneled and focused and uncaring for being caught.

Isaac turns into the next hallway. Now, he sees the fight.

Liam is pinned down by a guard with a tasered wand, but Isaac's eyes

slip right over him, beyond to the space behind. Scott is pinned down and electrocuted too, three guards and three jolts of electricity. He's propped up on his elbows, halfway to breaking free. His eyes are locked on Liam, on his pain, on his suffering.

But then, they fall on Isaac.

Brown eyes flood with red, blue eyes with gold.

Scott launches from the ground. He roars again, impossibly louder, hands flung back in strongly formed fists. He hits two out of three guards, rendering them unconscious on impact. And, in the same movement, Isaac takes aim.

This time, he throws the dagger.

Scott ducks without warning, doesn't need it, and the ring dagger connects with the final of his guards. It pierces below the right shoulder, hopefully not a lethal wound, but fierce enough to incapacitate.

Then, rejuvenated by the call of his alpha, Liam's eyes burn too. His fangs extend and spit drools from his chin as he pushes against the current of electricity. It crackles blue and bright around him, he brings sounds of anguish from his chest, but Liam doesn't give in. He powers through the pain and presses to his feet.

In a fluid move, he turns on the guard and shoves him bodily against the wall. His head smacks back and he crumples like a rag doll.

"Come on," Scott huffs, "we're getting Lydia out of here."

Isaac wants to kiss him. Just a little.

Lie Ability

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 16

Word count: 5,931

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He doesn't, of course.

It's the wrong time and the wrong place. (And probably the wrong person too, but Isaac won't go there. Not now.) So, he buries the urge and, instead, yanks his dagger free from the guard's chest. The man is still breathing and he just had Scott and Liam pinned down and electrocuted, so Isaac doesn't feel bad. Unapologetic, he wipes the blood on the gray of his uniform. It smears with a red to match Scott's eyes, the glow of an alpha and the wild determination of a packmate in danger.

Then, standing straight again, Isaac says, "I kept Tracy back, but the other three – Theo, Josh, and Corey – got through to the Closed Unit."

Isaac considers being more vague about it, considers keeping Corey's name a secret, but he can't run the risk. Knowledge is power, and all that.

"It's okay," Scott says, though Isaac didn't feel very ashamed of his performance in the first place. Still, the easy reassurance is nice. "The plan already went to shit."

Isaac's not surprised.

Meanwhile, Liam tests the mountain ash barrier. The door is wide open, but, as his hand comes to the arch way, there's a soft thrumming sound and a glow of purple light. Liam makes a quiet sound, muted surprise and awe.

Scott leans down toward the guard Isaac stabbed. His eyes are closed and he might have passed out. For a moment, Isaac thinks Scott is checking the damage. For a moment, Isaac is bracing himself for disapproval.

But then, Scott just snatches the guard's key card and walkie-talkie.

He doesn't hesitate before saying, into the speaker, "Does anyone have eyes on the Closed Unit? I need a status report."

There's a static buzz and then an answer comes in the form of, "*It's a war zone down here.*"

"Uh..." Scott says, a little awkwardly, "10-4." And, with all of his usual subtlety, "What about the patients? Lydia Martin?"

Isaac nearly facepalms.

"*Who is this?*"

The tone has shifted now. There's something harsh and dark behind the words. It's a warning sort of a sound, a test.

"It's..." Scott looks at Liam and Isaac, eyes a little frantic, he shrugs, "Unit Nine."

"*There is no Unit Nine.*" Then, staccato, each word punctuated, "*Who is this?*" And, "*How did you get--*"

Scott sighs, tips his head back, and crushes the walkie-talkie in his hand. The strong plastic crumples under his even stronger grip, twisting in on itself and dropping to the floor in scattered pieces.

(Isaac is not at all affected by this.)

"All right," Scott says. "We need to figure out another way to get into the Closed Unit."

It's a statement of the obvious, but it's true too. They need to get through. Because, right now, they have no idea what's going on. All they know is that the brownout is over and Stiles and Lydia haven't resurfaced. Oh, and the chimera pack just got past the gate.

So, yeah, they *need* to get into the Closed Unit.

"How do we get through the mountain ash?" Liam asks.

Isaac wants to say that Scott could do it. But he wasn't there. The night of the lunar eclipse Isaac was stuck in a crumbling cellar. He doesn't know what it took Scott to break through the ring, he doesn't know what his motivation was.

He only knows what Scott has said about it – that it almost killed him.

Isaac's not sure they can afford that kind of weakness right now. They need to get through to the Closed Unit, but they need to do it in a way that then allows them to actually fight.

Besides, the burden shouldn't all be on Scott.

"I don't know yet," Scott says. He flicks his towards Isaac. "*But* there's somebody else here that might be able to help us."

"Who?" Liam asks.

Now, Isaac is panicking. Just a little. Because Scott can't be saying what Isaac thinks he's saying, right? He can't. *They can't.*

And, anyway, isn't *he* in the Closed Unit? And, if he had a way around the mountain ash, wouldn't he have used it by now? He would've fled, but he hasn't. Isaac knows he's still here. And he knows that Scott would still see the good, but they can't. They can't trust him. They can't trust–

"Meredith."

Well, that's slightly better. Slightly.

—

They find her in one of the cells. She's not in the Closed Unit, which strikes Isaac as odd, but it's convenient, so he doesn't question it. (Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, or whatever.)

Scott uses the stolen key card to unlock the door with a buzz and a clinking of metal. Bulletproof glass comes open and the three of them rush inside.

"Meredith?" Scott asks.

Liam closes the glass door, and he and Isaac take up rank behind Scott. The space is small and overcrowded, but Isaac dutifully ignores the pulsing of discomfort that's nestled beneath his skin.

From this angle, Isaac can't really see Meredith. He can see the back of her head and the long stretch of her neck, but he can't see her face. She's turned away from them, back to the door and eyes towards the square tiles of the wall.

“Meredith? It’s Scott,” he says, voice deep and rough. “Scott McCall.”

It’s the first time Isaac has come in contact with Meredith since before Oak Creek. She was a little weird then, but she’s a lot weird now. She’s completely still. She doesn’t move to acknowledge their presence, she doesn’t twitch or flinch. She’s still as stone.

Scott spares a glance, looking back at Isaac and Liam. Isaac’s not sure what message his face conveys, but it must be enough. Because Scott is taking a step closer.

He moves slow and cautious, hand outstretched in front of him. It dawns on Isaac then that maybe they should be afraid of Meredith, maybe this is a bigger risk than they should be willing to take.

It’s the first time Isaac has come in contact with Meredith since she was revealed as The Benefactor. But he’s not scared and he’s not angry. Maybe he should be, but he’s not.

He remembers what Lydia told him – the reason Meredith enacted the dead pool. It was Lydia’s scream in the tunnels. And Isaac really shouldn’t think about that now, but...

Meredith wanted to wipe the slate clean. She wanted to start over. She wanted to build the supernaturals from the ground up. She wanted to make them in her – in *his* – image.

It’s a little bit ironic, in a not so funny way. Because the Dread Doctors and Theo are doing the same thing. They’re manufacturing creatures, they’re creating the perfect pack.

Scott’s hand makes contact with the back of Meredith’s chair. Then, he spins it.

Meredith turns around, but she still doesn’t look at them and she still doesn’t react. Her head is tipped forward just so and her eyes are trained at a downward, unseeing angle. Her expression is completely blank, if not a little haunted. Her skin looks like it’s dripping off her bones, pale with green undertones underneath. She looks sick. She looks... almost dead. She doesn’t even blink. She’s still.

Unresponsive.

—

Scott sits on the edge of Meredith’s bed. It’s made with crisp corners

and fresh white sheets, like it's never been slept in at all.

"Hey, Meredith," Scott says, panting and urgent, but not impatient. He's holding her hand in his, stroking gently over unfeeling skin. "Can you hear me? We need your help. We're trying to find Lydia, we're trying to get her out of here."

Liam looks back at the door, checking the halls for movement. "Scott, I think – I think we better go."

Scott ignores him. Says, "Meredith, listen—" *to the silence* "—there has to be another way to get to Lydia. We can't get past the mountain ash." His voice shakes a little, "How do we find her?"

"Scott," Isaac says. He keeps his tone soft and sympathetic, but there's alarm there too. Liam is right. They can't stay here much longer. They're already pushing their luck.

Scott stares at the side of Meredith's face. His eyes are lit with emotion, something near regret and desperation, something in between. He hangs his head, forehead meeting where both hands are cupping Meredith's.

He stays there for a moment, just holding her hand. He runs a line with his thumb, soothing and careful. Then, he exhales and presses up to stand and. *And*.

Meredith's hand catches on his fingers.

Scott pulls to a stop. He turns back. Meredith's expression is still faded and dull, but her hand is closed around Scott's. She's guiding him forward, she's drawing him up.

To the back of her neck.

Scott gasps and breathes, protests, "I could hurt you."

Meredith lets go of his hand, her own falling to her lap. She gives no other indication, no other signs of consent.

Scott looks back at Isaac. There's a question in his eyes.

Isaac's mind strays to Corey, to the sting of betrayal there, but this is different. This is Meredith and she's offering. And Isaac remembers Lydia's voice, remembers, "*all she ever wanted to do was help.*"

Isaac looks at Scott. There's an answer in his nod.

“Okay,” Scott whispers, eyes on Meredith again. Isaac hears the soft sound of claws flicking out. And then, a piercing squelch of impact.

Air leaves Meredith’s lungs in a rushing gasp. Her head falls back and her eyes go wide while Scott’s fall shut. The connection is made.

—

Isaac spins his daggers in his grip.

They’re standing in a cell and there’s nothing to do but wait and watch. Isaac doesn’t know what’s happening inside Meredith’s mind, but he tries not to think about it too much. He tries to be patient and focused.

He loops his daggers around his fingers.

“Can I ask you something?”

Isaac looks over at Liam. He’s still standing at the glass door, peering out into the hall every few seconds – on edge and on guard. But, when his eyes flick to Isaac’s, there’s a curiosity underneath.

Isaac shrugs.

“Why do you use those? The daggers, I mean. It’s just—” Liam frowns. “You have claws and fangs. You don’t... need them.”

Isaac frowns back at him. His gaze drops to the twin knives, to the rotation of metal against skin, to the shift from delicate twirls to a firm grip. He squeezes until his knuckles go white.

Isaac holds up the dagger in his right hand, the more dominant of the two, the one he’s more likely to rely on. “This belonged to Allison.”

Liam pales. His mouth opens and shuts a few times, giving a stammered, “Sorry. I – I didn’t. I didn’t know.”

Isaac shrugs again.

Liam looks like he wants to bolt. He’s twitchy and he won’t meet Isaac’s eye.

Isaac takes pity. He doesn’t really want to talk about this, but Liam never met Allison. And, for some reason, that seems more important than the swell of pain. So, he says, “They were something of a symbol in our relationship, I guess. When she...” Isaac looks down at the

dagger. "It's a way to stay connected to her." And, back up to Liam, "You know?"

"Yeah," Liam whispers, even though he doesn't. He doesn't know, but he doesn't need to. He doesn't need to know what it's like to lose a friend.

Isaac nods. He goes back to his spinning.

"Um," Liam says. Isaac cuts his eyes toward him again, not cold or warm, just neutral. "I was only asking 'cause... 'cause it's kinda cool."

Isaac smiles and it's genuine.

But then, Liam startles. He opens the cell door, only enough to peek his head out. He pulls back in just as quickly. His spine goes ramrod straight and he stares at Isaac with frantic eyes.

Isaac doesn't have to look to know what's wrong. *Orderlies.*

Isaac can hear them now. Two pairs of footsteps coming up the hallway, coming closer, gaining ground.

Liam is panting and preparing, a look in his eyes like, *are we really doing this?*

And then, the orderlies are there and the door buzzes and Liam leaps out of the cell with snarling growls and sharp claws.

Isaac doesn't hesitate to follow. He lets Liam take the initial blow, shoving both orderlies bodily against the wall, while Isaac slips through the sliding door. He slams it shut tight behind them. He doesn't hesitate here either, just knocks his fist through the card reader. It shatters and breaks.

With Scott locked in and secure, Isaac turns to the battleground.

One of the orderlies comes at Isaac, punches swinging, but he's no match for Isaac. Usually, Isaac wouldn't use the daggers in a fight like this – a fight with a human – but they're already in his grip and he's not letting go now.

Besides, Isaac has gotten good at walking the line between lethal and livable.

Isaac keeps a greater distance between himself and the orderly, more than he did with the chimeras or the berserkers or any other threat

he's faced with the daggers as his weapon. He keeps a gap of space between them, enough that he doesn't have the reach to dig in deep. He slices thin lines and shallow cuts, painful and bloody, but not fatal or fragile.

At some point, Liam ends up down on the floor. He's not helpless, he's fighting back just fine on his own, but Isaac isn't messing around. So, he ducks under the attempted punch of the orderly, and slides his left dagger across the ground.

He doesn't call for Liam's attention, but he doesn't have to. The beta grabs the dagger and stabs it into the soft flank of the orderly poised above him. The man makes a strangled noise of pain, almost gurgling in his throat. He tips to his side, hand already reaching up to staunch the rush of blood.

Just as efficient, Liam yanks the dagger out and throws it to Isaac. Again, there's no warning, but, again, they don't need it.

The dagger falls neatly into Isaac's grip, and, immediately, he uses it. He doesn't go for surface level. He thrusts the knife into the orderly's leg. He screams and collapses too.

The two orderlies land close to each other, and, in a debilitating move learned from the twins, Isaac bashes their heads together.

They go out like a light.

Liam stands, panting still, but smiling through fangs. He looks far too smug and far too proud, but Isaac's sure he looks much the same. There's a flicker of something between them, something that feels like understanding and pack bond.

But, before Isaac can get swept up in *that*, the doors buzz again. Another orderly runs through. Unlike the others, this guy is huge and barreling in fast and, *speaking of the twins...*

This time, Isaac hesitates, taking an instinctive step back. Liam doesn't. He charges full steam ahead, despite all odds.

Isaac loves this kid.

He shoves his daggers in the denim of his pockets, flicks his claws out, and growls.

The cell door opens with that same beep and scraping of metal. The giant orderly stands there for a moment, meeting Scott's reopened and slightly panicked eyes. Then, he tips forward.

The guard falls face first into the cell, hitting the ground and revealing Liam. He's standing there, gasping for breath with fists still held up at his sides.

"Oh!" Liam grunts. "Is he out?"

Scott looks between Liam and the orderly with that same, shocked look. His brows are furrowed and his mouth is parted slightly open. When he glances at Isaac, he just smirks in return.

"Yeah..." Scott says.

"Okay," Liam breathes. He gives an awkward thumbs up and then promptly passes out.

—

They find Parrish collapsed in the stairwell, not too different from how he looked at the hospital. His shirt is gone, likely burned to pieces, and his skin is marred with ash.

"Parrish?" Scott says, lightly jostling at his shoulder. "*Parrish*." The deputy begins to stir. "Parrish. Parrish, hey. Can you hear me?"

Parrish's eyes flutter open. He presses up from the ground, just gently propping himself up with a pant of breath and, "How did I get here?"

"We don't know. We just followed the burning smell," Liam says in that endearingly honest way of his.

Parrish looks down at his hands. The skin there is melted and fresh. His palms are red with the peeling of black charred edges.

"Parrish, listen," Scott says, voice gentle and leaning down. "Eichen's in lockdown."

Parrish looks up, up, up. His eyes follow the winding stairs to the shielded roof above. They tint with something akin to fear.

"There's no way for us to get out unless Plan B works," Scott says.

"Plan B?" Parrish repeats. "What's Plan B?"

Scott's mouth drops open in a very unsubtle show of trepidation, like he's caught off guard. Stuck. And, he turns his head towards Isaac and Liam, looking to them for his next move. Isaac's features remain blank, but Liam greets Scott with an expression that matches his almost to a T, making a sound like, "Uhhh."

Scott whips his head back towards Parrish, rushing to say, "Don't worry about it."

Parrish is Plan B, is the thing. They're counting on him now. He's their only hope.

"Right now," Scott continues, "we need you to find Lydia."

"Me?" Parrish asks, forehead wrinkling through the grime across his face.

"Actually, not completely you," Liam amends. There's a brief hesitation, his mouth pulls into the shape of the next soundless word, then goes slack. And, again, "We..." he looks at Scott and Isaac, "kind of need," he jerks his head to one side, "the other you."

"The hellhound."

Parrish's urgency runs dry. The tension in his face and body falls away. All that's left is something close to worry or dread, like this is exactly what he was hoping to avoid.

—

By some luck, there's a cart of cleaning supplies sitting abandoned in the stairwell. Liam starts digging through the cans and bottles, looking for something in particular – something flammable.

They need fire to activate the hellhound.

Plastic and metal rattle against each other as Liam's breathing turns halfway to frantic. Then, he finds what he's looking for. He turns with a blue capped disinfectant spray in his hands. Quickly, he passes it to Scott, who catches the spray with ease, uncapping it with a fluid motion.

Liam fumbles in his pockets, finding a lighter and flicking it open. He thumbs at the button, spinning the flint wheel and creating a spark.

Scott stands to the side of Liam, positioning the can behind the

dancing flame, but he doesn't press down. He's looking at Parrish with wide, apologetic eyes. He knows what they have to do. He knows they don't have any other choice, but, still, he pauses.

Parrish is still on the ground, knees pulled up to his chest and breaths coming out labored and heavy. It's a stark combination of fear and preparation. He's resigning himself for what's to come.

He's ready.

"Do it!" Parrish orders, bitten through gritted teeth and wild with the demand.

Scott screws up his face, eyes mostly squinted closed, and presses the nozzle. The spray fires and the flame bursts forward and—

Isaac looks away.

—

For a moment, there's just the crackling whirl of flame. There's just the harsh, clean scent of disinfectant, mixing with the smell of fire and smoke.

Then, Parrish is moving to his feet.

His eyes get that dazed, faraway look. They call his name, but he doesn't hear them. He's moving forward, marching ahead, following the orders of a connection that can't be explained.

They follow him blindly. Up stairs and around corners and down halls. Until, they approach the gate to the Closed Unit.

Parrish is smoldering. There's no other way to describe it. His skin turns dark gray, scorched and blackened. But, underneath, there's a pulsing of fever. He flickers with an orange light, burning from within, like the color of molten lava, like the singing red of stoked coals.

"How's he going to get through the mountain ash?" Liam asks.

No one responds, but Parrish's movements answer for him.

He walks with steady purpose. He reaches the gate, heat still radiating off of him in waves, and then he steps right through.

Orange flames lick at purple glow, meeting in a clashing contrast of rumbling blaze. What starts as a tiny impact implodes into a bonfire,

blinding and hot. Two forces battle against each other – ash and flame, warmth and cool, orange and purple.

Parrish steps through the gate, leaving only fire in his wake.

“He’s burning it right out of the walls.”

Orange wins out. It burns against purple, it eats against blue, it dominates.

Parrish doesn’t slow down, so neither do they.

They follow him through the Closed Unit and into the tunnels of Beacon Hills. They follow him past metal pipes and around a maze of corners. They follow him through darkness and into dank halls.

They follow him until they hear Lydia, hear her yelling, “Stiles, run!”

Parrish disappears out of sight. He turns into the next tunnel before they can follow. They run as fast as they can, skidding against stone floor as Stiles comes into view. He’s flying backwards, stumbling and floundering, as if he’s been thrown through the air, as if he’s been tossed back.

They all know what’s coming and no one hesitates.

Scott grabs Stiles and Isaac grabs Scott and Liam grabs Isaac. And, together, the four of them duck behind the cover of the corner.

There’s a shuddering gasp. And then, Lydia *screams*.

They get one, two seconds of the full effect. It’s piercing and loud. Louder than Oak Creek. Louder than anything Isaac has ever heard.

Then, it goes muffled. The scream gives to explosion. It’s a rush of air and an outburst of eruption. The entire tunnel shakes around them, rock crumbling and metal grinding. A blast barrels towards them, an undercurrent of sound waves and that same high-pitched wail, and they crash against the wall and to the ground.

Smoke fills and debris floods and Isaac’s ears are ringing with something that stings and burns.

A silhouette emerges out of the fog, out of the darkness.

Parrish carrying Lydia. Lydia limp in his arms.

Everything goes still. Their lungs ache with the intake of smoke and the desire to cough. The dust pours and settles in the air around them. The heat tickles at their skin and turns clothes damp with sweat. But no one moves.

Until Lydia does.

She winces and gasps with pained and broken sounds. She doesn't look well, but there are two hearts beating – Lydia and Parrish – and they're all alive.

The fire has died in Parrish's eyes, wilted down to green, and he's saying, "Where to?"

Scott exhales in relief, his face goes awed with it. And, "this way," Scott gestures down the long expanse of metal halls.

They move swift through the tunnels, fast and hurried.

As they race, Liam says, "There's a gate up ahead."

This is what he was doing earlier. After retrieving the body bags, when Isaac was with Stiles and Malia and Kira were with the lightbulbs, Liam was learning the tunnels. He already had some expertise, had already been captured and explored the depths before. He had a Plan B too, one that involved more than just Parrish.

"What about Mason?" Scott asks. He's matching Liam's stride, but he's looking at him sideways too, like he's at least a little dubious.

"He's on it," Liam says, not looking back. "Trust me."

And so, they sprint down the tunnels with Liam leading the charge. Isaac is vaguely aware of Lydia's voice, of stilted words and choppy sentences, but he's more focused on keeping up with Liam.

"Liam, slow down!" Scott calls after him.

The younger beta doesn't listen.

"Liam, wait!"

He doesn't do that either. Liam continues in his flight. He doesn't slow down and he doesn't wait. He tears around corners and, distantly, Isaac remembers, "*what is he? Like a were-cheetah?*"

Liam hurtles towards chainlink. Isaac can hear a buzzing in the air, like an electric force whispering its presence. Eichen is back online, they're not on lockdown anymore. This could be bad, this could be shock and pain, but Liam doesn't stop. He slams forward, wraps his hands around the gate, and—

Sparks fly, but dull in seconds. There's no electrocution, there's no roars of agony or blistering skin. There's just Liam, grunting and peeling open metal, panting and smiling. His eyes are bright and alive, and, "I told you!"

—

The Jeep's wheels screech on the pavement. Kira and Malia squeak to a stop in front of the others and the iron gate of the Eichen House entrance.

"Is she okay?" Malia asks, getting her first look at Lydia.

She's standing unsteady against Parrish. Her feet are bare and must be cold, but it's probably the least of their worries. She's pale and clammy, face and hair damp with sweat and congealing, drying blood.

"No," Scott says, not missing a beat. And, all in one breath, "We need to go, give me the keys, we need to get her to the clinic."

Out of nowhere, there comes a scratching squelch.

Parrish groans and tips forward, blood blooming on his back and hands slamming against the hood of the Jeep.

"Sorry, but she's coming with me."

Tracy.

She's painted with reptilian scales and holding Lydia tight to her, claws poised like a threat over her abdomen.

Isaac should've done more than knock her out.

"Okay, Tracy, just wait. You don't know what's about to happen," Scott levels. His voice is taut with fear, but he's fighting to stay calm. He's looking at Tracy and really seeing her. He's trying to look past the strong exterior, trying to see some light within.

"I'm taking her. *That's* what's happening, and *none* of you are going to do a thing—"

Tracy seizes up. Her body goes rigid and tight. She convulses and shakes. She loses control of her muscles. She drops Lydia and falls to the ground.

Isaac sees Stiles catch Lydia before the impact hits, like he was waiting and ready for her. But it's a background detail, inconsequential compared to the reveal laid out before them.

Natalie Martin stands with a taser wand in her hand.

"Could somebody *please* get *my daughter* out of this hellhole?"

Isaac's respect for her skyrockets.

—

This is the part where Isaac could get away with going home, would probably be safer for it, but he doesn't even consider the option. He just climbs into the passenger seat of the Jeep and buckles his seatbelt as they shoot off towards the animal clinic.

In the backseat, Stiles holds Lydia against him. He hasn't broken contact since she fell into his arms, and, by the looks of it, he has no intention of doing so. "We're almost there, Lydia, just hold on, okay?"

Lydia gives a jerking nod. She's writhing in his embrace, eyes and mouth squeezed shut, clamping down on the force building within. She's doing her best, but it won't be long until she blows. It won't be long until it's too much.

She's pale and thin and she looks like she's getting worse. She looks like she's dying.

Isaac looks away from the rearview mirror. He can't bear the sight. He can't lose anymore of his friends. *He can't*. He can't watch. He stares straight ahead, staring out at the road and getting a front row seat as the pane of glass begins to shatter, giving way under the half-aborted scream that breaks free.

They all flinch and wince, but Stiles doesn't take long to recover. He's giving it all to Lydia.

"Lydia, Lydia, hey, hey, hey. *Hey*, look, you're going to get through this, okay?" Stiles rambles. He cups Lydia's face in his hands, cradling her like she's made of porcelain, like she couldn't kill them all in a matter of seconds. "Lydia, look at me, you're gonna make it."

Lydia listens. She looks at Stiles and her eyes go dark. Isaac smells blood. He sees it dripping from Stiles' ears, doesn't have to be a banshee to know it's true when Lydia whispers, "But you're not."

Scott presses down on the gas. The engine revs and the speedometer quivers.

"Get her on the table!" Deaton orders, doesn't waste a second before his back is turned and his shelves are alive with the clattering of glass and the rushing pace.

They pick Lydia up, laying her gently against metal, but it hardly matters. Her back arches up in an unnatural, uncomfortable bow. Her teeth are clenched, but she cries with a pain that comes from deep within.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Stiles murmurs. Like Lydia, he can't keep the volume from pouring out.

"Hold her!" Deaton urges.

Lydia's jaw falls open of its own accord. Her nose wrinkles with the force and her eyes are shut tight again. She's trying to keep it in, she's trying to hold back, but tendrils of noise seep through the cracks. It's a squeaking at the back of her throat, a whine that can't be suppressed.

The walls of the animal clinic shudder and vibrate. The shelves jump and dance. They're running out of time.

"Doc, I think you gotta do something," Stiles exclaims. His eyes dart around the room, but always come back to Lydia. He can't look away from her. They're magnetized to each other, polar ends meeting in a searing connection.

"I *will*," Deaton says, "but, right now, I need you to keep her still."

Lydia is panting and grunting. It takes all three of them to contain her, to keep her from bucking up against them, to pin down the raging storm of power.

Deaton cups a hand over Lydia's throat. She makes a gasping, gaping sound. Deaton has an intimidating syringe in his hand, says, "Steady."

"What the hell is that?"

“Mistletoe.”

“*Mistletoe?* She’s got a freaking hole in her head!”

Lydia squirms. There’s another high yelp in her throat, another jumping of her body against their hands. She whimpers and whines, teeth biting down so hard Isaac can see the muscles in her jaw straining and flexing.

“Stiles, help!” Scott demands.

He does. The three of them press their weight into Lydia’s limbs while Deaton presses the syringe to the hole in her head. He presses down on the plunger. There’s a seeping, sticky sound of mistletoe rushing forward. The hole is filling, blood and white bubbling at her scalp.

Lydia breathes fast and harsh, sound emitting with each exhale. It’s building, pressure mounting and volume growing, sprouting up until the moment she finally breaks.

Lydia vaults out of their hold. Her body launches up and seated, almost a mechanical movement in the grace of it all. And then... the scream.

Squealing, piercing, sharp. The sound fills the animal clinic and doesn’t stop. It’s overflowing. It’s overtaking. It replaces all the oxygen in the room, makes Isaac’s lungs shudder and choke and stall. It rips through and suppresses. It’s a suffocating weight, a pressure at Isaac’s spine, a squeezing of his ribs. It’s tight. It’s claustrophobic. It’s crushing.

The windows shatter and glass ricochets and...

Silence.

Isaac has a piece of glass embedded in his cheek, a mere inch from his eye. He doesn’t care. He’s looking at Lydia. At her slack body. At her back against the table. At her closed eyelids.

Stiles gasps and shakes, but brushes shards of glass from Lydia’s face and hair. He’s cautious and careful, but a little desperate too. “Lydia?”

Isaac grabs Scott’s hand.

“Lydia,” Stiles says again. He’s running his hands over her features, searching and scared. She doesn’t twitch or flutter or move. “Lydia,

come on.”

Isaac’s heart seizes. He’s pretty sure it’s not beating at all. Just like Lydia’s. Just like—

“No, no, no, no no. Come on, Lydia. Wake up.”

Stiles is begging and Isaac is breaking. His eyes are stinging and his cheeks are dripping with more than just the blood.

“Come on. Wake up. Can you hear me? Lydia. Lydia, open your eyes.”

Scott’s grip becomes a vice against Isaac’s. They’re clinging to each other, watching in frozen silence. Shock grapples at Isaac’s skin, crawls up the back of his throat.

“Come on, come on. Come on. Listen to me, Lydia.”

The volume drops out of Stiles’ voice. It’s a whisper now, a quiet pleading, like this isn’t happening, like this isn’t real.

“Lydia, show me your eyes, okay?”

Isaac doesn’t want it to be real. It’s Lydia. It’s... They can’t. They can’t do this without her. They can’t lose her. They can’t.

“Lydia, you have to open your eyes.”

And yet, she’s gone. And yet, her eyes stay closed. And yet, she’s still.

“Lydia.”

Stiles looks up. Just briefly, just a quick flash. Isaac sees his amber brown eyes, sees the devastation lurking, sees him crumbling.

Isaac makes a choked off sound at the back of his throat. Scott holds his hand tighter.

Isaac told Stiles this wouldn’t happen. He practically promised and he meant it. He was... He was so sure. He was so sure she would be okay. He was so sure she was invincible. He was so sure they would all be together again.

He was so sure.

Lydia moans with an exhale of breath while Isaac’s catches in his lungs.

Her eyes open.

Relief is everywhere. It spreads like a wildfire, like a suffocating, crushing thing. It burns in Isaac's chest and escapes in a broken, wet sort of laugh.

Stiles startles in a hum.

Lydia's eyes are wide. She's stunned and scared. Her body is locked up and she's looking only at Stiles. She's only seeing him.

"You okay?"

Lydia nods. Her heart is beating and her eyes are open and she's alive.

Stiles smiles, and there's so much feeling written there, so much it's almost blinding. He repeats, like he can't quite believe it, "You're okay."

Stiles' hand finds Lydia's. She stares at where their fingers meet. She's trembling and weak, but she's got emotion too. Wonderstruck, almost.

"You want to try to sit up?" Stiles asks. He's so attentive, so focused, so grounded in her.

Lydia gives a jerking nod. She looks near tears. Overwhelmed.

And, with Stiles' stabilizing hands on her, she moves upright. She's a little dazed still, but her eyes are on Stiles. She settles under his care. She relaxes and breathes. She looks safe. She...

Like she forgot they weren't alone, Lydia lets her eyes trace the room. She looks at Isaac for only a second, but it makes another tear flush down his cheek, hitting his jaw.

And then, Lydia looks past Isaac and past Scott. Her mom stands in the doorway, on the edge of the space, on the edge of the world.

"Mom?"

Isaac lets go of Scott's hand and turns away. He doesn't watch as heels click and Ms. Martin undoubtedly comes closer. He tries not to listen to her shaken breath of, "*oh, baby.*"

"They saved my life, Mom." And Isaac's still not watching, can't see the hug and the warmth and the coming home. But he knows who Lydia's looking at. "Stiles saved me."

Love crowds the room and splinters Isaac's senses.

Chapter End Notes

That movie trailer though...

A Credible Threat

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 17

Word count: 10,116

They're spying on Parrish. There's no nicer way to put it. Except, maybe, to clarify that Parrish *asked* them to follow him.

Because, at some point every night, Parrish leaves. He doesn't know when or why. He has no recollection of the events. He just knows that he wakes up to burnt clothes and blood. It's not as simple as sleepwalking. He's not wandering aimlessly. He leaves with purpose. He's searching for something. And that's why he needs them to follow him. He needs to know where he's going and what he's doing. If people are getting hurt because of him, if he's adding to the growing body count of Beacon Hills, he has to know.

Or, at least, that's what he told Argent, who, in turn, reported back to the rest of the pack.

"He's headed to the school," Scott reads off his phone.

Liam pushes past Isaac to lean between the front seats of the Jeep, resting on the center console and looking between Scott and Stiles. "Why is Parrish going to the school?"

"It's not Parrish. At least, not right now," Scott says, voice deep and husky.

"Okay," Liam says, like Scott's missing the point. "Why's the hellhound going to the school?"

"Cause he's got a yearning desire for higher education," Stiles says. He keeps his tone and expression blank, turning to glance at the younger teen. Then, impatient and exasperated, "Liam. The hellhound's going to the school, so we're going to the school. Okay?"

Stiles pointedly shifts gears and speeds up.

—

Less than five minutes later – an impressive feat considering they were

at least ten minutes away when Scott got the text – they pull up at the school. Isaac climbs out of the Jeep, standing between Scott and Stiles. They look out at the exterior halls of Beacon Hills High School. It's dark and empty, nothing out of place or of note.

Liam slams the car door closed. The bang reverberates in the open air.

The three seniors turn around slowly, leveling Liam with unimpressed stares, as if to say, *really?*

Liam at least has the decency to look cowed. He purses his lips and nods, whispering, "Sorry."

Stiles looks from Liam to Isaac and back again. His mouth is dropped open and his eyebrows are drawn low. He looks like he can't believe his luck. It's sort of funny, but Isaac bites back any sounds of amusement.

The four of them carry on into the school, meeting the approaching silhouette of Chris Argent. He's got his gun out, holding it at his side, and he checks over his shoulder every few seconds. There's five feet between them, quickly dwindling, but in the open space, it feels dangerous and uncertain.

"Where's Parrish?" Scott asks.

"I lost him," Argent admits, closing the distance. They stand under an awning of the school, shrouded in the quiet of night and the stars twinkling in the sky. "He's moving too fast."

Isaac and Scott make eye contact.

"Scott," Liam's voice comes, grave and subdued. "That guy's not moving at all."

Isaac quickly turns his head, following Liam's gaze. Down the hall, there's a body, splayed out on the ground and bringing the scent of blood to Isaac's senses.

Scott takes the first step towards the body.

Stiles throws a hand out, hitting Scott's arm, like he's trying to suppress the movement. Scott glances back at him, jerking his head in a "*come on*" gesture. He continues in a steady forward climb, expecting the others to follow.

And they do.

The body is ripped apart and bloodied. Stains of red concentrate around his claw torn chest, seeping out onto the pavement below.

They don't stop. They inch past the dead, moving down the sidewalk. And, a few feet away, there's a second body, similarly decimated and killed. Now, they stop. They stop between the two murders, caught between peace of mind and a gruesome revelation.

Scott is staring at the body, focus intense and detail oriented. Isaac takes a figurative step back. There's smoke and school buses up ahead, one of which has its back doors open.

"Look," Isaac whispers.

The bus is full of bodies and blood. It's a massacre. It's pure destruction.

And... movement. A young male lifts his head, stretches out an arm, and calls, quiet and weak, "Help... me..."

Scott is immediately moving closer. He's not rushing, but he's not hesitating either. He sees the eyes of the wounded and hears the heartbeat and call for rescue. He can't ignore it.

"It's a trap." Parrish and his voice come out of nowhere. Isaac is getting used to seeing him like this, shirtless and charred and flickering with internal flame. But the voice is new. It's distorted and deep, like it's resonating and echoing in his chest.

Parrish stands between the pack and the bus.

"Please," the guy from the bus begs.

Scott takes another step. His jaw is set and his eyes are determined.

Parrish looks over his shoulder, fiery irises on display and fangs sharp in his mouth. There's a hint of sympathy in his next words, just the barest of feelings. "You can't help him."

In the end, Parrish is right.

The body is cut in half, torso falling out of the bus and onto the pavement. Blood and intestines run thick and dark. There's a gasp from Isaac's left, a flinching back from Stiles.

Isaac doesn't move. He suppresses a gag and stays perfectly still.

The Beast appears as if stepping out of the shadows. (*And isn't that just great? More shadow men – creatures – to deal with.*) It's bigger than Isaac could have fathomed, bigger than the footprints or the communication tower's footage made it out to be. The Beast towers in the bus, huge shoulders filling the space. It's inky black with eyes that glow with a purple hue, like the glint of mountain ash activated or the shine of a blacklight.

Isaac gets the feeling he's going to bear witness to the clash of orange and purple again.

"That's big. No one said it was *that* big," Stiles rambles, devoid of any emotion, but pulled taut.

"I did," Liam argues through gritted teeth. He leans back to address Stiles, but never takes his eyes off the monster.

The Beast growls. Like a jaw completely unhinged, its mouth is wide and full of razor-sharp teeth. The sound is deep and bellowing. It sets Isaac's bones on edge.

Parrish answers the call. Claws emerge from fingertips and his skin erupts with flame. He roars back, just as deep and just as loud.

Then, the Beast turns and runs, bursting through the front of the school bus with a shattering of glass. Parrish follows, leaving a trail of smoke and ash in his wake.

The pair disappears before they can even think to follow.

"What the hell is happening?" Scott asks.

They still can't turn their eyes. None of them can look away. The Beast and Parrish are gone, mere specks on the horizon, but they can't break their gaze.

"It's getting smarter."

—

Apart from following Parrish, things have seemingly settled since breaking Lydia out of Eichen House. At least, marginally so. The Beast is still wreaking havoc on the town, and, if it's getting smarter, the stakes will definitely be rising quickly. But... immediate disasters have

gone down. At least, enough that Isaac can finish his college application.

Derek forces Isaac to celebrate, which they do by ordering Indian food and buying fancy stamps – with wolves on them because Isaac is hilarious.

Derek also keeps telling Isaac that he should probably apply to more than one school. (*“Not ‘cause I don’t think you can get in, just ‘cause that’s what people do. Safety schools, you know?”*) Isaac knows Derek’s right about it being the smart thing to do, but he’s not sure if he’ll actually take the advice or not. For one, Isaac has no idea where he would even start with other schools. And, also, filling out one application had been overwhelming enough. Not to mention the cost eating up his paycheck because he refuses to let Derek help pay.

Regardless, Isaac feels at least a little bit proud of himself. And, when he drops the manila envelope in the mail, he feels a little more adult than usual. Independent, maybe.

The thing is: applying is a risk. It’s putting Isaac in the line of fire of rejection. Maybe that’s why he’s been sort of private about it, keeping the knowledge of his pick between himself, Scott, and Derek. Because if he doesn’t get in, he’s not sure what the backup plan will be.

Isaac knows that backup plans are often necessary. Take Plan B at Eichen House, for instance. If they hadn’t been prepared with Parrish on sight, Lydia or Stiles or both would probably be dead.

Sometimes, backup plans are necessary. But Isaac’s not sure he needs a safety nest right now. Right now, he thinks what he needs is to push himself and take the risk.

So, he pours his all into a UC Davis application and sticks it in the mail with silly wolf stamps. Then, he hopes.

—

“Hey, Isaac, I gotta go,” Derek calls up the spiral stairs.

Isaac appears at the top, looking down at Derek below. He’s got his hands leaning against the metal banisters and a bag slung over his shoulder.

“I still don’t like this plan,” Isaac says.

Derek is going over to the McCall house, where he's meeting with Malia and Braeden to spend the night inside a ring of mountain ash.

"It's just a safety precaution," Derek says, which he's said at least five times since the plan was first proposed. "The Desert Wolf likely won't come until the full moon, but if she does..."

They've been through this over and over. Isaac knows it's a low risk plan. But he can't stop his mind from straying to Derek's bullet ridden chest.

Still, Isaac knows Derek won't budge. He's not going to abandon Malia and Braeden. So, Isaac just says, "Yeah."

Derek smiles at him, something a little apologetic and flush with sympathy. "I'll be careful. I promise."

Isaac nods, "I know." And, "Good night."

"Good night," Derek repeats.

Isaac doesn't come downstairs and they don't hold a proper goodbye. Derek just leaves, and Isaac locks up the loft once his footsteps have retreated and he can hear the whirring of the elevator.

—

The loft is dark and quiet. It's weird having the space to himself.

Isaac really shouldn't mind it. He's always been the type to enjoy his isolation. He's always been okay with being alone. He's always been used to it.

He's not anymore though. He's used to Derek's presence. As quiet as they often are with each other, the loft is never like this. Dead, lifeless, empty.

Isaac doesn't like it.

He calls Scott. It's earlier in the evening than their routine usually begins, but Scott's voice is always a calming source.

"Isaac? Everything okay?"

Scott sounds like he's moving around. Isaac worries that he's interrupted something, that Scott is busy and Isaac is being needy for no reason. Except it's too late to back out now.

So, "Yeah. I'm okay. It's just." Isaac bites the wolfsbane bullet, "Derek left a little while ago and the loft is too quiet. It's weird."

"Oh," Scott sounds relieved. "Um. Well. They – Malia doesn't want me involved. I was supposed to go to Stiles' house, but if you're freaked out, I could..."

The implications are clear. Isaac ignores the way his heart jolts in his chest. "Uh. I'll be... I'll be fine, it's—"

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

Isaac knows that voice. It's one that leaves no room for argument. Dejected and a little bit embarrassed (but secretly pleased), Isaac answers, "Okay."

"Okay," Scott echoes.

Isaac spends the fifteen minutes pacing and cleaning.

—

"Scott?"

Isaac is laying backwards in Derek's bed, feet up near the pillows and head tipped slightly over the edge. He looks upside down at Scott, who's sitting normally on the couch. (Lame.)

"Yeah?"

"Do you... Do you think zombies could be real?" Isaac asks, eyes flicking between the ceiling and Scott.

Scott's face twists in a soft kind of amusement. "What?"

Isaac tries to shrug, then remembers how he's sitting and has to scoot back so he doesn't fall. "Haven't you ever thought about it? I mean, so many people have come back from the dead, you know?"

"Is there something you're not telling me?" Scott questions, a teasing jump to his voice and eyes glinting. "Isaac, did you fuck up and make zombies a thing?"

Isaac makes a noise of protest. "I'm serious! It could – It could happen!"

Scott just laughs. Isaac hates what the sound does to his heart. He

turns to honey, almost melts right off the bed.

“What would you do?” Isaac asks. “If the apocalypse happened.”

It’s one of those weird hypothetical situations that pops into Isaac’s mind every few months. It had never been a good time to bring it up, but Isaac and Scott aren’t doing anything important, mostly just sitting in comfortable silence, so it seems as good a time as any to ask.

“I don’t know,” Scott says, taking Isaac just a little bit more seriously. “Argent has a bunker.”

Isaac rolls over onto his stomach. “You expect me to believe that you’re going to run and hide?”

Scott shrugs. “It’d be the smart thing to do, wouldn’t it? Hide and wait it out. Lydia and Stiles would have a cure within three months, guaranteed.”

He’s probably right about the cure, but, “That sounds like what you think you’re *supposed* to do. That wasn’t my question.”

Scott sighs, “Isaac...”

Isaac just looks at him.

“We both know I would do something dumb and try to save everyone,” Scott says. He admits it like he’s ashamed or self-conscious. Isaac doesn’t like that.

“That’s not stupid,” Isaac says. “It’s brave.”

Scott exhales a humorless laugh. “And what about you? What would you do?”

Isaac resists the urge to say something ridiculous like, *follow you*. Instead, he mumbles, “I don’t know.”

“You expect me to believe that?” Scott asks, parroting Isaac’s words back at him.

It’s fair, if a little mean. Isaac was the one that brought it up. He huffs, considers rolling onto his back again, just so he doesn’t have to meet Scott’s eye. (He doesn’t, but it’s a near thing.)

“Probably spend three months trying not to get claustrophobic in a bunker,” Isaac says. It’s a half-lie, close enough to the truth that his

pulse doesn't betray him. The heart of it stays hidden, a secret declaration of, *if that's where you were*.

Scott hums. It's not a pitying sound, but Isaac can't quite discern the feeling there. Maybe Scott knows Isaac is avoiding the question. And, now, Isaac really kind of regrets bringing this up.

"I'd probably go and get myself non-consensually bitten again," Scott says. There's a touch of comedy to it.

Isaac chuckles because he thinks he's supposed to. "What would you do then?"

"Probably off myself," Scott says. He phrases it like a joke, but he's missing that usual twitch of his lip and the mischievous glimmer in his eyes.

Scott is serious.

Isaac sits up. He thinks of parking lots full of gasoline and flares of sparkling flame. And Isaac wasn't there for that, but hearing about it in passing was enough to scare him senseless. This isn't funny.

Isaac knows he should drop it, but he feels a little sick. "Scott..."

"Sorry," he says quickly. "Bad joke." Then, before Isaac can get another word in edgewise, "What would you do?"

"If you got bit?" Isaac clarifies, even though he knows that's not what Scott's asking. "Probably go and volunteer to get bitten too. You know, like an idiot."

Because I'd follow you anywhere, even into certain death.

Scott doesn't know Isaac is serious. He just laughs, and that's it. Isaac follows him into mirth and the gloom fades.

—

They both sleep downstairs. It's a little bit indulgent on Isaac's part, but if he's going to have Scott under the same roof for just one night, then he's going to keep him close. And, since Isaac knows he can't quite get away with inviting Scott upstairs, he'll have to forgo his room for a night.

Isaac considered offering Derek's bed to Scott, but then he remembered that werewolf senses are a thing and Derek would likely

murder him if he came home to find Scott's scent twisted in his sheets. (Derek still might not be super happy with *Isaac* sleeping in his bed, but he's done it before. And, besides, at this point, their scents are already so intrinsically intertwined that he might not even notice.)

So, Isaac scrounges up extra blankets and pillows, setting Scott up on the couch while he gets cozy in Derek's bed.

Isaac falls asleep to the sound of Scott's even breathing. He wakes when it turns ragged.

He presses up onto his elbows, bleary in his state of half-wake. He rubs at his eyes and squints through the darkness – even werewolf night vision takes a few seconds to adjust.

Scott is restless on the couch. His legs kick out a little frantically and he's making soft sounds at the back of his throat.

Isaac is on his feet before he can think about it.

He kneels at the side of the couch, placing a gentle hand on Scott's shoulder. He doesn't shake him, doesn't want to scare him, just whispers, "*Scott.*"

Isaac expects it to take a little more effort. He expects to have to call out at least twice, but Scott's eyes fly open on the first meeting of his tongue behind his teeth, the quiet click of the consonant.

Scott gasps. His heart freezes in his chest, then skips back into a jackrabbiting rhythm.

"Scott," Isaac says again.

Panicked brown eyes turn his way. Scott's skin is damp with a thin sheen of sweat as he stares down at Isaac. "Sorry," is the first word out of his mouth. And that stings, just a little.

"Don't be," Isaac shakes his head.

Scott's hand is resting over his own sternum, circling in gentle motions. Isaac knows what that means, knows what the nightmare must be about. He scents the air, checking for traces of blood. He can't find any, but that hardly means anything. The space between them is so thick with emotions – fear and concern, mostly – and old blood doesn't smell as sharp as fresh does.

“Can I see?” Isaac asks. Because he’s stupid and careless and his brain to mouth filter is apparently offline.

Scott’s fear colors with confusion. Then, he realizes his hand and it goes stock still.

Isaac curses himself, but doesn’t say anything more. He figures: Scott will either outright refuse or mumble a too polite excuse.

He doesn’t anticipate Scott’s acquiescence, but it happens anyway. Scott pulls up the end of his shirt, revealing planes of smooth, unharmed skin. The gouge of Theo’s claws are gone.

Isaac makes a quiet noise of surprise. He balls his hands into fists so he doesn’t do something absolutely absurd like reach out to touch. “Wh... When?”

“The night we saved Lydia,” Scott says.

Isaac tries not to pout at the sad sweetness of it all. He tries not to think about that bus ride, when Scott’s chest was similarly torn and unhealing, when he didn’t allow himself to heal until he knew Derek was alive.

Isaac needs to stop thinking about psychosomatic punishment. It’s the second time he’s thought of that bus and that motel and he’s not sure why it keeps coming to mind.

Isaac tries, instead, to focus on the relief. Of Scott being healed through and content, of Scott feeling safe now that his friends are too.

Scott drops his shirt and Isaac falls out of his enchanted daze. He asks, “Do you want to talk about it?”

If it were Isaac, the answer would be no. He hardly ever gives away the details of his nightmares. He likes sharing that the haunting occurred, likes the comfort of a shared burden and the knowledge of company. But he doesn’t like to lay his demons out to dry, doesn’t like to hang them on display.

Isaac doesn’t know what Scott likes. Scott usually goes it alone. He called once, that one time when spring was warming into summer, but he seemed to regret it immediately. Isaac doesn’t want to push him, but he doesn’t want to walk away either.

Scott shrugs. (Which, really, isn’t any help at all.)

Isaac nods. "Okay." His knees are starting to ache from the uncomfortable crouch, but he doesn't move. He stays rooted at Scott's side, hand a light pressure on his arm. "Do you... Do you want to go back to sleep?"

"I never sleep after," Scott says.

And that shatters something in Isaac. Because Scott might have only called once, but Isaac knows he's frequented by nightmares, just the same as the rest of them. He knows Scott isn't immune to the suffering. He's known that for a while.

But this? Isaac didn't know this.

It's the 'never' and the certainty that break him. Because that sounds like a pattern. That sounds like Scott has been running on empty more than once, and no one has ever noticed. Or, at least, Isaac hasn't noticed.

Scott always goes it alone. Isaac already knew that, but he didn't realize the extent of it. He didn't realize just how much Scott was struggling in silence.

Isaac frowns. "Oh."

Scott doesn't say anything. He looks faded and worn.

There's an idea growing at the back of Isaac's mind. It's probably ridiculous and unnecessary, but the instinct is too strong to fight. Before Isaac can stop it, he's grabbing pillows and blankets from Derek's bed.

"What are you doing?" Scott asks.

Isaac looks up at him, then back to his work. He lays the thickest of the comforters out beside the couch, smoothing down the edges with gratuitous precision. "If you're not sleeping, neither am I."

"You're..." Scott blinks. "On the floor?"

"It's a good floor," Isaac says, laying back and throwing the second, thinner blanket over himself.

For a moment, Scott just stares at him. Isaac forces himself to stay neutral, forces himself not to give out under the intensity of those eyes on him. For a moment, Scott just stares.

Then, he does the unthinkable. He gathers up his own blanket and pillow, stepping over Isaac and joining him on the pallet. Their arms touch and Isaac stares determinedly at the ceiling, trying not to worry about the way Scott's heart is still racing.

"You're really not going to sleep?" Scott asks into the heavy quiet of the post-midnight world.

Isaac flicks his eyes to the side. "Are you?"

Scott doesn't answer right away. Their eyes are locked and they're way too close, but this was Scott's doing, so Isaac isn't moving. If this is helping, he's not going anywhere, even if he does feel embarrassingly like a livewire.

"I should," Scott says eventually. "I should get over this whole 'not sleeping after nightmares' thing. It doesn't help anyone." And that sounds like Scott's self-sabotaging altruism, but Isaac doesn't comment, just listens as Scott talks. "I know it's unlikely that I'll fall asleep and have the same exact nightmare, but my body doesn't get that. Like, I can never relax enough."

Isaac doesn't want to push, but he can't help but say, "Maybe if you didn't keep it all bottled up..."

Scott sighs, but there's a slight smile to his features. "Yeah, I know. You've said it before, I have a savior complex."

Isaac smiles back. "No, no, you don't just *have* a savior complex, you *invented* the savior complex."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Sure it does," Isaac presses on, barely influenced by the meager protest. "Just – You don't have to do it all on your own. We want to help you." Isaac swallows. "I want to help."

Scott nods. "I know."

Isaac nods back. They're still looking at each other and they're still too close. Isaac feels warm under his thin, nearly threadbare blanket.

It's silent for a while, the passage of time marked only by joint breaths and collective heartbeats. (Isaac's not sure if his sped up or if Scott's slowed down.)

“It’s usually the berserkers,” Scott whispers to the shadows. “Everything in the dream is distorted ‘cause I’m looking through the skull.”

Isaac doesn’t speak.

“I have all this power and half the time I don’t know what to do with it,” Scott admits. “There’s a line somewhere, where unnecessary and necessary evil meet. I don’t know if I’ve found that yet. I... I feel like I’m constantly flirting with darkness.”

A few months ago, Isaac would have argued that vehemently. He would have told Scott that he was nothing but light, that darkness didn’t dwell inside him.

Isaac knows that’s naive now. He’s seen glimpses of it. He’s seen the amount of power Scott has. He’s seen it shifting below the surface, waiting to be unleashed.

“It might seem longer, but you’ve only been an alpha for a year, Scott,” Isaac says. “That’d be a big adjustment for anyone.”

“Yeah, but... I’m a *true* alpha,” Scott says. “It’s – Aren’t I supposed to, I don’t know, be *meant* for this? Or something?”

“That doesn’t mean it’s going to be easier.” They’re speaking so quietly. Isaac’s voice is barely a whisper. It’s an unsustainable softness, causing random syllables to catch and pull, coming louder than the rest.

“I just–” Scott looks away from Isaac and up at the high ceiling of the loft. He steels himself, like he’s scared to even admit this. “I just wonder if the savior complex is even worth it.”

“What do you mean?” Isaac asks. His limbs lock with dread.

“Like... I keep holding back and people keep getting hurt because of it. Or worse: people do my dirty work for me.”

And Isaac knows he’s talking about Stiles and Donovan.

“That wasn’t your fault,” Isaac mumbles.

Scott looks at him again. There’s disbelief in his eyes. He almost looks annoyed, like Isaac is being ridiculous, like Isaac is *lying*.

“Hey,” Isaac says gently. “Listen to my heart.” And, slow, “That wasn’t

your fault.”

Scott shakes his head. “I believe that you believe that.”

“Scott,” Isaac whispers. “What you’re talking about, that kind of power that takes and demands? That’s–” Isaac runs his lips together. “That’s not *you*.”

“But wouldn’t it be better if it was?” Scott questions. “Wouldn’t it be more effective?”

“Effective in what? In scaring people? In hurting people? I – *Scott*, you...” Isaac fumbles with his point, a little desperate to be heard. “That kind of power isn’t sustainable. It’s always going to implode. It’s. It’s not you.”

“You keep saying that. What does that mean?”

They’re on the edge of something dangerous here, something revealing and out of place and irrelevant. This isn’t about Isaac-and-Scott. Not really. This is about, “You’re the power that we need, Scott. You... You give us hope.”

I need you, Scott. You give me hope.

“You care so much and you want to help everyone. You see the light in everyone, and, yeah, sometimes you’re wrong, but a lot of the time you’re right,” Isaac rushes his words, a little jumbled. “You don’t give yourself enough credit, and maybe we don’t either. Everyone always talks about Stiles, but your – your intuition is good too. You were right about Derek, and Argent, and Kira, and.” Isaac flushes. “You were right about me.”

“Yeah,” Scott breathes. “Yeah, I was.”

“Nobody doubts you, Scott. You shouldn’t either.”

Scott’s next exhale comes a little shaky, and Isaac knows he’s gotten through. He knows Scott has listened and will take his words to heart. So, Isaac nods. And, in an impulsive act, he grabs Scott’s hand and places it over his own chest, where his heart beats beneath.

“Now, we’re going to try to sleep because I’ve decided you need it and you’re supposed to be listening to my opinion when I’m brave enough to share it.”

Scott scoffs, but it's lighthearted.

"You might be the alpha, but we're your pack," Isaac adds. "You have to learn to rely on us too."

(Let me take care of you. Let me. Please let me. You have to let me. I want to.)

"Okay." And then, Scott shuffles impossibly closer to Isaac, hand planted firmly in the center of his chest. He closes his eyes and mercifully doesn't remark on the spluttering of Isaac's heart.

—

Isaac's not sure when it happened – doesn't know when the nightmare woke them either – but, eventually, he and Scott had both drifted off again.

Now, Isaac wakes first for once. He peels himself away from Scott's body heat, albeit reluctantly, and goes to the kitchen to make breakfast and honey-lemon tea. He cracks eggs into a pan, sets sausage to sizzling, and sticks some bread in the toaster. It's the same breakfast Isaac usually makes, but enough for two instead of one.

Isaac isn't the best cook, but he's sufficient in the kitchen – sort of had to be. He's got enough skill to fend for himself and enough to make a decent meal, so that's what he does.

He doesn't often cook for anyone but himself. Derek doesn't eat breakfast until after he's driven Isaac to school because he's a *heathen*. But this is nice. There's a purpose in the routine, a feeling of providing and looking out for and taking care. It's nice.

Scott gets to wake up to the smell of breakfast. Isaac feels a little self-satisfied about the whole thing, watching Scott shuffle into the kitchen with a twitching nose, tired eyes, and sock clad feet barely lifting off the floor. (He sleeps in socks. Isaac tries not to hold it against him.)

"You're making me breakfast?" Scott asks.

Isaac hums his affirmation.

Scott leans against the counter, observing Isaac as he spreads butter on golden toast and adds the perfected amount of honey to steaming mugs of liquid comfort. "How come you never did this when we actually lived together?"

“Because I was *your* guest,” Isaac lies. “You should’ve been feeding me. Which you never did, by the way.”

“You would’ve hated that,” Scott says.

He’s right, but Isaac only shrugs. He serves up plates of breakfast and they eat in peaceful quiet.

Scott offers to do the dishes and then won’t take no for an answer, so Isaac sneaks off to take a shower and tries not to think about how domestic this all feels. He tries to wash away the aching smell of contentment, but it doesn’t really work.

Then, when he’s getting dressed, he finds Scott’s hoodie in his closet.

He kind of completely forgot about it, but he’s definitely had it for way too long. He considers ignoring the sight and just keeping it forever, but can’t stomach the theft.

So, he brings it downstairs with him, tossing it to Scott. “Forgot I had this. Sorry. It also hasn’t been washed. So. Double sorry.”

Scott fumbles to catch the fabric. He looks between Isaac and the hoodie, back and forth and back again. His expression goes unreadable and Isaac turns apprehensive and cold.

Then, the loft door opens with a metallic creak.

Derek freezes in the doorway.

And Isaac hadn’t considered the fact that Derek would be coming home this morning. Isaac neglected to tell him that Scott was coming over, so, of course, Derek would be back in time to drive him to school.

Isaac watches Derek’s eyes go to the blankets on the floor, then the pair of dishes in the sink, then the box of tea on the counter. He’s taking it all in. Isaac doesn’t want to know what conclusion he’s come to.

“Um. What happened here...?” That’s Derek’s teasing voice.

“Nothing.” Isaac is too quick about it, too defensive, too obvious. He’d really like it if the Beast showed up and slashed his throat right now.

“Right,” Derek nods. He looks a little concerned, but mostly like he’s holding back laughter. Then, because he’s Isaac’s favorite person ever,

he switches into, “Is Scott gonna drive you to school? I could use a day off from chauffeur duty.”

“Mason said it’s not just a transmitted frequency. It’s high-powered, like it has to be a really strong signal,” Liam explains the theory to the group that’s gathered around a table in the library.

As it stands, every time the Beast shows up, there’s been a transmission source. The communications tower, the strike downtown near the radio astronomy observatory, the attack on Deaton at the army base with huge radar arrays.

“And that’s causing it to shift?” Lydia clarifies. She’s back at school already. Because of course she is.

“No, I don’t think it’s just that,” Scott says, leaning over and speaking low. He’s the only one standing, probably too pumped with adrenaline to sit. “Last night, Argent said it was getting smarter. What if the Dread Doctors are trying to make the Beast grow faster?”

“With frequencies?” Stiles asks, squinting.

“No, by shifting. The frequency is just the trigger. The important part,” Scott waves his hand, like a carrying on or thinking motion, “is when it shifts into the werewolf.

“Like Peter,” Lydia says. Her voice is too cheery for the content of her words.

“Right,” Scott says, intensifying. “Yeah, when Peter was an alpha, he got stronger every full moon. Eventually, the burns healed and he was back to normal.”

“So, the Dread Doctors don’t want to wait until the full moon,” Liam guesses. He always gets excited when an idea clicks. It’d be sort of sweet, if not for the circumstance.

“They want the Beast to be as strong as possible as fast as possible,” Scott confirms.

“Because of Parrish,” Isaac whispers. He blames it on the library environment, but, really, it’s a spark of concern.

(Isaac feels Scott look his way, but he ignores the heaviness of his

gaze.)

“If this is happening tonight,” Lydia’s head jerks and she makes a quiet sound in her throat, something a little despondent, “what are we going to do?”

“Uh, we got one clue to go on,” Stiles says, holding up a finger to demonstrate. Stiles reaches into his backpack, pilfering around before bringing out a picture. He slides it across the table. “This came from the hospital.”

It’s a photo of the bloodied shoe-print, from the night of the attack downtown and the hospital evacuation.

“Whoever’s lurking inside the Beast,” Stiles says, hands gesticulating wildly, “is wearing a size 10 of indeterminate make.”

“Indeterminate?” Lydia questions, head propped up on her hand and looking a little unimpressed.

“Means it’s a partial print,” Stiles explains. “Basically, it was all we were able to get considering all the fire, blood, and *carnage*.”

Isaac doesn’t miss the use of ‘we.’

“How many size 10s are out there?” Scott asks. There’s an implication there, like, *this isn’t really much to go on*.

And that’s true. But so is Stiles’ next statement.

“*Only one* with Parrish’s blood on the sole.”

There’s a brief pause. It’s less than three seconds, but feels pointed from Isaac’s view. Scott and Stiles are locked in eye contact, something passing between them, something unspoken. Isaac can’t place the connection, can’t figure out what they’re thinking.

“So, are we going to try to get the game canceled?” Liam asks. Because that’s the heart of the theory. If the Beast shows up where there’s frequency, then it will show up at the charity lacrosse game tonight. That’s an inevitability.

“No, no, we’re gonna play,” Stiles leans back in his seat, sarcastic as ever, “but we’re just going to *hope* really hard that it *doesn’t* turn into a blood-soaked massacre.”

Then, the rest of the group makes a collective move to stand, but Liam

stays seated. He twists his face up, stopping them and saying, “Okay, but aren’t we kind of missing out on a chance to catch this thing?” He looks up at Scott. “We don’t have the *who*. But we have the *where* and the *when*.”

Isaac looks at Scott too. He gives a small sort of shrug. Liam might have a point. It’s reflected in Lydia and Stiles’ reactions too. Stiles falls back in his seat with his mouth dropped open and Lydia flicks her eyebrows in concession.

Scott licks his lips, pursing them and giving a quick jerk of his head, like he’s torn. Eventually, he says, “There’s too many people.”

“And we still don’t *actually* know if it’s going to happen,” Lydia says, but her tone suggests she already knows what the odds are. Still, she sticks to it, “It just might end up being a regular lacrosse game.” And, softer, “It’s possible, right?”

“Oh, that’s absolutely *possible*,” Stiles says with a sharp tilt of his head and a narrowing of his eyes, which they all know means, *but not likely*.

“When has it ever been a regular lacrosse game?” Isaac poses. (The answer is never. Literally never.)

Lydia sighs.

“So, we’re still getting the game canceled?” Liam checks, looking at Scott again. Isaac can’t tell if he’s imagining the disappointment there or not.

“We’re getting the game canceled,” Scott reiterates, leaving no room for argument.

Then, the group gets up and disperses, exiting the library with more information than they entered with. Which, Isaac muses, is kind of the whole point of a library.

—

Isaac is at his locker between classes when Liam approaches, seemingly out of nowhere and twitching with restless energy.

“Um,” Isaac says, still shoving books into place. “Can I help you?”

“Argent said the Beast was getting smarter, right?”

For a moment, Isaac just stares at Liam, trying to suss out what his

intentions are with this conversation. They just went over this a class period ago.

“Yes, he did say that,” Isaac answers, but his eyes are roaming over Liam, looking for signs of distress. He comes up empty.

“Don’t you think maybe we should be trying to stop the Beast *before* that happens? Like, before it gets smarter,” Liam suggests, over explaining just a little.

Isaac sighs. “I don’t know. Why are you asking me?”

“Because you seem to know the most about the Beast,” Liam says, completely shameless. Then, “Well, except for maybe Mason.”

Isaac considers that for a moment. He feels a little flattered that Liam has come to him about this, rather than Scott or Stiles. He tries to turn that feeling into something useful, something close to advice. “Look, Liam, your whole ‘act first, think later’ attitude will get you out of some tight situations – I’m not going to deny that. *But...* it’s not always the right move.”

Liam flusters a little. Isaac can see his guard rising and his defenses mounting.

Isaac continues before he can protest, saying, “There needs to be a balance between impulse and caution.” And, going a little vulnerable, “I had to learn that too.”

Liam looks a little embarrassed and discouraged, but he’s got a slight smile too. Like, maybe this is something he already knows about himself. Like, Isaac hasn’t told him anything new. But maybe hearing it again helps. Isaac doesn’t really know.

Liam gives a nod and says, “Right. Well. I should go to class.”

Isaac nods back.

Liam turns and walks away, exiting the exchange without the answer he was looking for, but, hopefully, with the one he needed.

Just then, Scott sidles up to Isaac. “Hey.” He looks between Isaac and Liam’s retreating back. “What did he want?”

He doesn’t feel the need to out Liam’s momentary waver in loyalty. Isaac knows Liam wouldn’t go against the plan on his own. He

wouldn't betray them like that. He's just trying to share his opinion, and that's a *good* thing. This is a collective, a democracy, a joint effort. So, Isaac just shrugs, and says, "Some sage advice."

Scott laughs. His face shines with his smile and a chuckling, "Right."

Isaac smirks, smug and pleased with the reaction. Then, "And what did *you* want?"

Scott's grin falters for half a second, looking caught out. It doesn't last and it doesn't make sense, but it shifts into, "Just letting you know Stiles and I are going to talk to Coach, see if we can get him to cancel the game since Stiles' dad can't do it."

"Wait. *Finstock*?" Isaac exclaims, well aware of the startled tone in his voice. "I – I thought he was in rehab."

"He is," Scott says, nodding in a small, quick movement. "But he might be the only person who can forfeit the game. So."

(So, we have to try.)

Isaac scoffs. "Well, good luck reasoning with him. I mean, seriously, have you met the guy?"

—

When the Devenford Prep bus arrives, Isaac quickly crosses the parking lot. He stands on the edge of the sidewalk, watching and waiting. It doesn't take long for Brett to catch his eye.

Isaac jerks his head back, in a gesture of, *follow me*. And Brett does.

Isaac leads them around the corner, into one of the quieter, exterior hallways of the school. Isaac tries not to remember the body they found here two nights ago.

"What's going on?" Brett asks. He adjusts his bag on his shoulder, meeting Isaac at eye level.

"The Beast is going to be at the game tonight," Isaac wastes no time getting to the point. "We're trying to get the game canceled, but there's a chance that might not happen and..."

Isaac trails off. This feels like treachery, like treason. Brett isn't pack. He's an ally, but he's still Satomi's. This feels like sharing secrets and feeding information to the enemy. (Isaac knows that's ridiculous and

going too far, but it's instinct. It's the protective impulse of pack against outsiders.)

"And?" Brett prompts.

"We might have to play, and, if that happens, we might need your help," Isaac says.

"Against the Beast?" Brett clarifies.

Briefly, Isaac wonders how much Brett actually knows about the last chimera that's creating mayhem and massacres across Beacon Hills. Isaac considers giving a deeper explanation, but he doesn't have the time.

"Yes, but also..." Isaac trails off again. He sighs, scrubs a hand through his hair. He's only doing what Scott told him to, he's only enacting Plan B. "But also against Kira."

"Wh-?" It's a broken off noise of surprise and confusion.

Isaac doesn't want to give too much away. He doesn't want to explain the newfound mistrust or the fox spirit rearing up inside Kira. He doesn't think that's right to share, so he just says, "If we signal you, can you get her out of the game?"

Brett hesitates. Isaac doesn't push or shove or threaten. He doesn't remind Brett that he owes them for saving his life. Because he doesn't. They don't save people for favors. Isaac can only hope that Brett feels a tug of loyalty, out of the kindness of his heart, or some other cliché bullshit.

"Yeah," Brett agrees. "I can do that."

Isaac thanks him and they split off. And, on the way to his next class, Isaac sees Kira across the hallway. She gives a friendly smile and a wave. Isaac tries not to choke on his guilt.

—

Isaac and Derek join the others in a science classroom. The lacrosse players are all in uniform with their gear ready even though, hopefully, they won't have to use it. Outside, the sun has set and the bleachers have begun to fill with students and parents alike, but, hopefully, they won't have a game to watch.

The group gathers together to go over the plan one more time. Everyone is here – except for Lydia, who’s with Argent and a badly injured Parrish. (His injury only serves to secure the need for cancellation. If the Beast attacks, they won’t have the hellhound to rely on.)

Scott walks around to the head of the table, saying, “Mason, you know your part...”

The teen in question fills in the blank with, “Corey and I break into the Devenford bus and search their shoes.”

“I take out the TV vans,” Malia adds.

Derek joins, “I check the stands for bloody shoes.”

And, Stiles finishes, “Right before the whistle, Coach forfeits the game.”

Scott gets this small, pleased grin. He looks proud and happy. Isaac’s anxiety evaporates under the glow of sunshine.

“Just out of curiosity,” Malia interjects, “what if it doesn’t work? What if we have to go up against this thing?” She looks around the group as the room goes quiet with dread. “I mean, I hate to bring up bad memories, but Scott’s still healing from what Theo did to him.”

“No, he’s not,” Isaac says before his brain can catch up to the implications there. He feels all eyes go to him and feels himself going red.

“He’s right,” Scott says, still with that little glimmer of happiness, not seeming to recognize what Isaac just owned up to. The attention goes to him now. Scott lifts his jersey and Isaac blinks away – he’s already too flustered for this. “It happened the night we got Lydia out of Eichen House. I *healed*.” Scott glances at each member. “When we were all together again, when we were a pack.”

“The Beast doesn’t have a pack,” Liam says.

And that gives Isaac hope. So often, they’ve gone up against solitary villains, villains who don’t understand what is to be connected and unified. So often, it’s the final blow, the reason for their victory.

“Not like us,” Scott says. His smile is contagious. “We can do this, guys. No one dies tonight.”

There's three TV vans, loads of equipment, and bleachers full of sitting ducks. The stadium lights are glowing fluorescent white, shining down on the battlefield below.

Derek passes Isaac on his way towards the stands, clapping a hand on his shoulder in a brief show of support. Their eyes meet momentarily, and the only thing Isaac sees is, *good luck*.

And he shouldn't need it, not for the plan of searching shoes, but he accepts it readily. Isaac nods and tries to return the blessing tenfold.

Then, Derek departs and Isaac turns to look at Stiles, who's sitting to his right. He's staring at the TV vans with his mouth dropped open in thought, like it so often is. Stiles must feel Isaac's gaze because he turns to look at him. Isaac gives a whisper of, "Now?"

Stiles nods and presses up from the bench, joining Coach on the side of the lacrosse field. Isaac strains his hearing to eavesdrop, listening in as Stiles says, "Hey, Coach, now is the, uh, time to forfeit the game."

Coach ignores him.

Stiles continues, "Now's the perfect time to forfeit the game."

Coach crosses his arms over his chest and pointedly looks straight ahead. Isaac is getting war flashbacks to the jack-knifed tractor trailer and the whistle and Stiles' desperate pleas for reason. (*And, really, the bus is coming up again?*)

"You gotta... Coach?"

"Stilinski," Coach breaks his silence, smiling something sort of evil, "I've *never* forfeited a game and I *never* will." His smile falls and he orders, "Get on the field."

He blows his whistle. And *there's* the Coach Finstock they all know and loathe.

Their carefully constructed plan comes to pieces with one stupid man's stupid decision. They should have known Finstock would pull a fast one on them. He's predictably infuriating in that way.

The team has no choice but to jog out onto the field, sticks in hand

and Scott saying, “Okay, it’s fine. Malia’s still going to take out the wiring on the TV vans.”

“And then we have an hour and a half to try to find someone with blood on their shoes,” Liam says, agreeing and trying to remain optimistic.

“One person out of four hundred,” Scott says, like it’s something easy and simple.

It’s not. It’s a needle in a haystack. That is, if the teenage chimera is even at the game tonight. They could be at home or at work or anywhere else across town. Or they could be here and wearing a different pair of shoes. The odds are stacked against them. Four hundred to one.

This is ridiculous and so exactly what they should have expected. Of course the plan would fall apart like this.

Brett joins them at the center of the field, readying for the starting play of captain against captain, McCall against Talbot. But he’s here for another reason too. He looks at Isaac, “I thought your Coach was forfeiting?”

Isaac shakes his head. “Nope. He backed out and refuses. Would—”

“No,” Brett says. “Coach would never.” Then, “But my sister’s helping Derek get the bleachers covered.”

“Oh,” Isaac says, “awesome. Thanks, man.”

Brett nods.

Scott looks between the two betas, emotion swirling in his eyes, but then the ref’s whistle is blowing and Isaac is falling back to his defensive position. And... the game begins.

—

The game gets off to a rocky start. Brett snatches the ball in the first play and scores with ease, but then, in the second, Kira comes for revenge. She snags the ball and shuttles down the field, body slamming multiple opposing players to the grass. She takes aim and fires.

The ball hurtles into the back of the net and the Cyclones section of

the bleachers erupts with cheers.

Isaac doesn't cheer with them. He stands with Scott and Stiles – Scott reaches out to help one of the fallen players because he's just *like that*. They watch Kira walk away from the goal with a victorious smirk.

"You think Kira's playing a tad aggressive?" Stiles asks.

The question is punctuated by Kira spinning her lacrosse stick through the air, readjusting her grip in a spiraling display of movement. The stick is too similar to the sword. It's a gateway to the fox.

Scott admits, "We might have a problem."

Right on cue, Kira's eyes glow orange.

—

The next few plays go much the same. Kira continues to dominate on the field, taking out players left, right, and center. She doesn't hold back and she doesn't give into Scott's urgent, "Kira, maybe you should ease up on the other players."

"I'm trying to win," Kira barks back. Her voice is like Isaac has never heard it before. She's usually nice and sweet, if a little awkward. Now, there's a darkness underneath. Her tone goes deep and defiant.

"But you didn't even have the ball," Scott reasons.

Kira whips her head to the side, taking in the sight of almost the entire Devenford Prep team collapsed on the field, green jerseys blending in against green grass.

Isaac hopes this is the moment she'll snap out of it. He hopes she'll see the destruction and recognize the damage that she's doing.

But, of course, she doesn't. Like Coach, she can't be reasoned with. And, distorted, she warns Scott to, "Stay out of my way."

Then, Kira pushes past Scott, roughly bumping her shoulder into his. Scott stares after her, expression almost fearful, reflecting under stadium lights.

Isaac knows it's time to enact Plan B.

Still, he waits until Scott looks his way. Isaac looks back at him, expectant and patient at the same time. He waits until he gets a nod of

approval. Scott's features pull a little sad, but they both know it's the best decision. For everyone – Kira included.

And so, Isaac joins number 28 at the center of the field. They kneel in the grass, helmets pressed close together, and prepare for the ref's call. (It's not Isaac's usual position in the game, but nobody seems to notice.)

"Down... set..."

Peering through his helmet, Isaac gains Brett's attention. Then, with impossible speed, Isaac flashes sulfur eyes. Brett nods. Signal received.

The ref blows his whistle and the game starts up again.

Putting up appearances, they grapple for the ball, but, quickly, Isaac lets Brett collect it into the pocket of his stick. Brett takes off running down the field, rocketing towards their goal even as Kira comes straight for him.

Brett has no fear. He's always been a little ruthless, and that's what makes him the perfect backup plan. He doesn't hesitate, just checks Kira and sends her to the ground without mercy.

The crowd groans as she hits the field.

Brett circles back. He stares down at Kira, "Not so tough now, are you?"

Kira doesn't hesitate either. She's not usually ruthless. She's strong and capable, but she's never been vicious or mean. Now she is though. She charges at Brett, lacrosse stick swinging through the air and colliding with his helmet. The impact is so powerful it launches the helmet into the air and knocks Brett off his feet.

Isaac winces.

"You!" The ref calls, marching up to Kira. "You're done. Get off the field!"

There's a standstill moment where Isaac is worried Kira is going to attack the referee. But then, she sets her jaw and storms off the field. She glares a scathing look at Scott as she goes.

Isaac jogs over to Brett. He holds out a hand, "That was perfect. Thanks."

Brett blinks up at him, a little bleary and out of it, but he accepts the proffered help. “You could’ve given me a warning. She’s tougher than she looks.”

Isaac huffs an exhaled laugh. “Yeah. Sorry.”

Kira’s number is fading into the night as she takes off towards the school. Even with such distance between them, Isaac can sense the fury radiating off of her. Scott feels it too, standing on the edge of the field, stuck between the desire to follow and the need to stay put.

Lori, Brett’s sister, comes out from behind the bleachers. She looks from Scott to Kira and back again. There’s a question in her eyes.

Isaac can’t see Scott properly, but his answer must be an affirmative. Lori goes after Kira and Scott runs back onto the field. He skids to a stop at Isaac’s side. He’s biting at his lip and looking more stressed than should be allowed.

Isaac gives him a playful tap with his lacrosse stick, hitting the side of Scott’s calf. Scott makes an affronted sound and hits back. A little bit of light returns to his eyes.

—

The game presses forward, but, with Kira off the field, Devenford Prep is obliterating them. It’s five to one in their favor, the fifth point coming only after Liam collides hard with a green jerseyed player. He goes to the ground with groans that sound like something’s broken.

Scott and Isaac rush over to help him to his feet. Liam pants between them, “We’re getting crushed.”

“It’s okay,” Scott says. “All we need to do is give the others enough time.” It’s a demoralizing truth, but he’s right. It doesn’t matter if they win or lose. It just matters that they find the shoe. “Like I said, no one’s getting hurt.”

Liam sighs. He’s still cradling his injured arm, glaring at Scott with purposeful intensity.

Scott gives him a weak laugh, concedes, “Except for us.”

The air runs lighthearted for a moment, but it doesn’t stick around. Scott gets a faraway look in his eyes, a daze of focus and distraction. He turns his head to the side, facing towards the school, the same

direction Kira disappeared in.

Isaac listens too.

There's labored breaths, distinctive yelps, heavy groans, clattering impacts. It's the telltale sounds of a fight breaking out.

"Kira..."

Scott takes off. He runs towards the school without a second thought. And Isaac, just as impulsive, follows after him.

Isaac makes it to the edge of the field, is just about to duck past the bleachers, when Derek moves into his path. It reminds Isaac of the assassination game, of Derek blocking his way and holding him back.

He does the same now. "Stay put," Derek says. Isaac flounders, body hitching forward, reflexes screaming at him to move. Derek holds his ground, "You need to stay with Liam. I'll go check on Scott."

Isaac gives a feeble growl and wants to fight it, but he doesn't. He steps back and lets Derek go.

—

They suck so bad. Isaac can tell Brett is trying to help them out. He's trying not to score, but there's only so much he can do when their performance is as pitiful as it is. It's nearly impossible to lose against them.

Which means: the game is drawing to a close. Which means: the news is going to want to start its report.

"Something's wrong," Stiles says, standing in the middle of the field. "I don't think Malia's got all the vans."

Which means: the transmission is going to go live. Which means: they'll all be screwed.

Unless, "We'll get her more time."

Stiles looks at Liam, incredulous, "How the hell are we going to do that?"

"We'll even up the score," Liam says.

If they can tie up the scoreboard, then they'll go into overtime. If they

go into overtime, then Malia will be able to take out the vans and they'll have a greater chance of finding the bloodied shoe.

"Once again, how the *hell* are we going to do that?" Stiles counters, still just as disbelieving and pessimistic as before.

Isaac and Liam share a look. Isaac can't suppress his smirk.

"Just get us the ball."

—

With determination refreshed and fortified, Isaac and Liam find their stride. They work together as a synchronized unit, tuning into each other and the unique frequency of pack bonds. Isaac takes up the more defensive position of the two, keeping the ball out of enemy sticks and clearing the line towards the goal. Meanwhile, Liam takes the offensive. He snags the ball when Isaac passes it and expertly scores again and again.

The stands are a near-constant cacophony of cheers of victory and stomping feet. The team whoops and hollers, circling Liam and gaining hope. With it comes desperation and a hungry desire to *win*.

They work together seamlessly until the very last play. The timer has dwindled down to nothing. They're one point away from tying out the game.

This is their last chance.

The whistle blows and Liam sprints. He grabs the ball and slips past players, evasive and quick. Isaac can hear his heart pounding from across the field, knows his is going crazy too.

Isaac tries to check the players closest to the goal, tries to maintain the steady rhythm of success, but the Devenford team has caught on now. They've noticed the pattern in their plays, have noticed Liam and Isaac overtaking and slamming towards the finish like a dark horse in the race.

It earns Isaac a harsh collision.

He falls to the ground, impact too sudden and strong to overcome quick enough. Isaac can only watch as Liam makes a final last ditch effort.

Like an idiot or a genius, Liam rounds the back of the goal. He averts the team's expectations and catches them by surprise. He gains advantage. He loops back around. He throws the ball with a forward dive.

Liam hits the ground and the ball hits the back of the net. The scoreboard tallies up. Five to five. Tied.

"That's overtime!"

—

Everything is going so well. They're turning a corner, they have an opportunity to win the game and redeem their plan. It's all in reach now. They're so close to victory.

And so, of course, it gets pulled out from under them.

They're getting set for the next match up, preparing for the final battle, when, suddenly, a violent screech fills the air. The satellite dishes of the TV vans explode with a rain of sparks and smoke. All the while, a high-pitched tone fills the air, grating at eardrums and bringing hands up for cover.

Then, silence.

Isaac takes his helmet off. The field stretches with tension, atmosphere hazy and dire.

The growling starts.

It's coming from everywhere. Goosebumps rise on Isaac's skin and rumbles tickle at his ears. The roars are getting louder, gaining ground and coming closer. But, as Isaac turns and spins, he can't find the source.

It's Liam who spots the Beast first. He glows his eyes and runs towards the parking lot, towards a yellow school bus, towards growls and snarls. Isaac is yelling after him, shouting to slow down, stop, wait.

Liam doesn't.

He leaps up and the Beast swings down.

The Maid of Gevaudan

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 18

Word count: 3,724

Chapter Notes

Slightly shorter chapter today :(

Time stands still. Everything pauses in that moment in between, the moment before the strike, the moment before claws meet skin. Then, like a button pressed, life springs back into motion. The Beast's claws collide with Liam's chest and he goes down hard and wounded.

Isaac doesn't have time to check on him. He's vaguely aware of Stiles and Hayden swooping in, but it's all background noise.

There are too many civilians. There are too many innocent lives waiting to be stolen.

Isaac can't go frozen or flee. He has to fight back.

Isaac transforms into a subtle half-shift. He still has the presence of mind to recognize that a big, animalistic attacker can be easily explained away, but a humanoid werewolf would be a lot harder to write off. So, he goes only for glowing eyes, bared fangs, and flashing claws. He has to be able to defend himself, but he has to be careful too.

Isaac takes a running start at the Beast. He's practiced with fighting opponents that are bigger than him. He's been doing it most of his life – surviving against forces that tower over him. (And maybe it shouldn't be true considering how ridiculously tall he is, but he's never had the bulk that most evils do.)

Except, the Beast isn't just bigger than Isaac. The Beast is *huge*. It's an unnatural force of nature. It's a monster. It's an inky black silhouette, a monster made of shadows, shadows pretending to be real.

Isaac doesn't succeed in landing even a single hit before claws are sweeping over his spine, digging in and drawing blood. Isaac growls against the pain. He tries to plant his feet, tries to redirect, but it

doesn't work. Instead, he ends up with another slash across his middle. He stumbles back, back into a hand on his forearm and Derek yelling, "Isaac! Come on!"

The tug on his arm pulls a sharp pain down the length of Isaac's back, but he doesn't fight it. He lets himself get dragged away from the menacing form of the Beast. He follows Derek's pace and they run across the field, ducking under the meager cover of the bleachers.

Isaac tries to lean back against the metal of the structure, but it digs into his open wound and he cries out in a soft mewl of discomfort and hurt.

Derek hasn't let go of Isaac. He starts using the grip to take his pain now, drinking in the stinging ache as black veins crawl up his arm. He grits out, "What the hell were you thinking?"

Isaac wants to shrug, but thinks better of the movement. His entire body feels stiff and stagnant, locked up and searing with injury. "Liam was hurt and the field was still full of innocent people."

Derek huffs, but doesn't comment. He keeps pulling in pain. Isaac has half a mind to stop him, remembers red flickering to blue, but he doesn't. He accepts the relief and tries not to move too much.

"I finally got a good look at it," Derek whispers. He doesn't need to. There's still sound all around them, a cover of screams and running feet and growls, though the volume is beginning to fade towards the school. "I remember now. It all came back to me. The story of the Beast and..." Derek winces. "The Maid of Gevaudan."

They stay under the bleachers, which Isaac thinks is maybe a little bit careless, given the fact that they're still blanketed by echoing shouts of panic and growls of the Beast. But Isaac is too hurt to keep battling and he doesn't necessarily *want* Derek to go up against the chimera. So, they stay under the bleachers, hiding and waiting for Isaac to heal.

All the while, Derek tells the story.

"The Beast began terrorizing Gevaudan in 1764," he begins. "The war in North America had ended, and, though the French lost, the soldiers returned home. It was meant to be a time of celebration – of survival and reunion. But the killings cast a shadow over the festivities."

It's not hard for Isaac to imagine. The reunion of people coming back together, of surviving against great odds, only to be met with more carnage and more bloodshed.

"Nobody really knew what the Beast was. Some said it was part-wolf, others said part-hyena. All they really knew," Derek strokes his thumb over Isaac's wrist, "was that it killed at night and only for sport. It didn't eat its victims."

Isaac frowns. He already knows most of this. He doesn't understand what Derek is leading towards, but he sits and listens. He doesn't really have much choice in the matter. He probably couldn't get up right now if he tried.

"There was an archer. Her name was Marie-Jeanne. She was revered as the best hunter in Gevaudan," Derek explains. "She was a skeptic. She didn't believe in the supernatural, but she couldn't deny that *something* was attacking her home. So," Derek takes more pain as Isaac whimpers, "when another body was found, she took charge of a hunting party. She organized a group to track down and kill the Beast."

"Wait," Isaac interrupts, resisting the urge to shake his head or try to sit up straighter. "Everything I've read has said that the Beast was killed by Jean Chastel."

Derek nods. "I don't know if that was a cover story or a theory that took over, but it's not the truth."

"How do you know all this?" Isaac asks. He's not disbelieving of Derek. He's just a little confused, caught off guard by the sudden twist in history. And, he wonders: *why did it take so long for Derek to remember?*

"It's a cautionary tale," Derek says. He looks down at where his hand is still holding Isaac's arm, at his nail beds where claws would pierce through if he let them. "My mother used to tell me and my siblings the story. She was warning us. About how easy it is to paint our kind as the villains." Derek looks up to meet Isaac's eyes. "And about how quickly hunters can turn on those closest to them."

There's an implication of *Kate*. It's Derek saying that he didn't listen, that he was cautioned and didn't heed the warning. It's Derek's explanation of the unasked question. He pushed the story down because the insinuations were too agonizing to bear, too much like blame.

Isaac doesn't dare say Kate's name. Only, "Okay." And, "You can keep going."

"Right," Derek says. Then, he launches back in, "The hunting party searched from dawn till dusk, but they didn't have an encounter with the Beast until nightfall. On that first night, it attacked them. The entire hunting party was slaughtered. Except for Marie-Jeanne. She survived only because of a man named Henri."

Isaac listens intently, waiting for the moment when he hears what Derek is *really* trying to tell him.

"Marie-Jeanne got her first glimpse of the Beast that night. She saw for herself the creature unlike any other. It was her first flicker of doubt, her first wondering if maybe the Beast could be as unnatural as the rumors told."

Isaac tries to imagine it. He tries to imagine an archer against the Beast. But he's only ever known one person with the bow as her weapon. And that's too painful to think about.

"Henri took Marie-Jeanne back to his home, a cabin protected by a circle of mountain ash trees. Here, he had all the makings to *protect* himself against a werewolf." Derek places the stress with obvious distaste, like they both know protection wasn't the goal. "Mistletoe, mountain ash, rowan berries, wolfsbane – *everything*. He had it all and he taught her everything he could."

"And then what? She used it to kill the Beast?" Isaac questions. Surely it can't be that simple.

"Not quite," Derek answers predictably. "Marie-Jeanne knew she couldn't just take out another hunting party armed with mistletoe and wolfsbane. She needed an advantage. She needed to know her enemy."

With that sentence, there's a spark of clarity. Now, Isaac thinks he knows where this story is headed. He's pretty sure he's not going to like it.

"She implemented a plan to expose the identity of the Beast," Derek explains. "She made drinks with rowan berries and brought them to the tavern."

Isaac really wants Derek to hurry up and get to the point. The sounds of fighting still haven't stopped. Isaac can still hear people screaming

and beasts howling. He itches to move, to run, to help.

But he doesn't. He stays and he listens. Hide and heal – that's what werewolves are supposed to do when they get caught.

"We don't know exactly what happened at the tavern that night, but we know Marie-Jeanne's plan worked. She saw the rowan berries take effect and discovered the human side of the monster," Derek says. Isaac feels a small tug of interest, of anticipation, of hope. But then, "We believe it was someone close to Marie-Jeanne, but, as all the records were destroyed, no one actually knows who the Beast was."

Isaac sighs. "Derek–"

"Wait, okay? I'm getting to it," he interjects. "I promise."

Isaac sighs again, but nods. He trusts Derek. He trusts that this is important. He settles into the grip on his wrist, lets Derek leech a little more pain.

"We do know one thing," Derek says. (*And when did Derek switch to 'we'? Who is 'we'? Is 'we' the Hale family?*) "The Beast wasn't born or bitten."

Isaac nearly flinches. "What?"

"Do you know the legend of what happens to a person who drinks out of the puddle of a wolf-print?" Derek prompts.

Visions of Deucalion swirl in Isaac's mind. The alpha of alphas. The apex of apex predators. Death, Destroyer of Worlds.

"The Demon Wolf," Isaac whispers the revelation.

Maybe it should make him feel better that they have Deucalion on their side now. Maybe it should make him feel better that they've beaten a self-proclaimed demon wolf before.

But it doesn't. All Isaac can think of is the risk that they're taking in trusting him. All Isaac can think of is everything that it cost them to win back then. All Isaac can think of is Erica and Boyd and ice bath sacrifices.

Deucalion wasn't turned from the puddle of a wolf-print. He wasn't a real demon wolf. And yet, they lost so much in the battle against him, he *took* so much from them.

What are they going to lose against the Beast?

“Marie-Jeanne went back to Henri to figure out how to kill the Beast,” Derek continues. “They knew a simple arrow wouldn’t be enough, so they came up with an idea to get the Beast to defeat itself.”

It’s hunter strategy 101. The best way to defeat your enemy? Get someone else to do it for you.

“Marie-Jeanne hunted the Beast for three years until she finally caught up to him in 1767.” (That timeline doesn’t bode well for them.) “She stabbed him with the weapon, impaling him with a pike made of mountain ash and wolfsbane, forged with blood under the full moon. She used the Beast’s own weight to kill him.”

Isaac swallows.

“They sentenced him with the punishment of *damnatio memoriae*. They erased every part of him from history. They *burned* it all. They let his name be forgotten while *La Bête*,” Derek practically spits the name, “lives in infamy.”

Derek squeezes Isaac’s arm a little tighter than necessary, but he doesn’t pull away. He watches the anger flicker across Derek’s face, the reminder of a cautionary tale and the way that history has always been written – by the survivors and the victors.

“The Beast was a *human* serial killer first, but, of course, it was the werewolf that was blamed. It’s the werewolf that was remembered and not the man. It...” Derek sighs. Some of his anger falls away, turning more resigned. He returns to the objective facts of the story, to, “Marie-Jeanne never left Henri, even after their fight was finished. They married and she took his name.”

The name comes to Isaac’s lips before the thought has finished forming. It spills out, an obvious next step, the perfect conclusion. He breathes, “*Argent*.”

“Marie-Jeanne was the first hunter,” Derek confirms. “Hers was the story that influenced *centuries* of the code and the Argent regime, of wolves being blamed and vilified, of our kind being chased and cornered.”

Marie-Jeanne was the first hunter, the beginning of *centuries* of hiding

and healing.

“And it was all built on a lie.”

Now, it makes more sense to Isaac why Gerard has been cured and brought back into the fold. He would know the story better than anyone. In fact, Isaac would bet all his savings that Gerard knows the name of the Beast.

The issue is: he’s still an unreliable narrator. He’s still going to contort the story to fit his image, to paint the Argents as people of good, as *heroes*.

He’s going to try to make them think that they can’t take on the Beast without his help. Isaac knows that’s why Derek has taken the time to tell the story now. He’s spreading the information, the facts, the *truth*. Because he knows that knowledge is power. Because he knows that, the more people there are in the loop, the less likely they are to become manipulated by or dependent on Gerard.

Because Gerard doesn’t want to defeat the Beast out of the goodness of his heart. He wants his reputation, his stamp on history, his legacy.

And he won’t hesitate to kill the teenager inside if it means getting what he wants. They all heard him say it: if he had to, he would kill his own son.

Derek’s being annoyingly overprotective. Isaac isn’t fully healed yet, but he’s well on his way. The scratch across his middle is shallower, stitching together fast and almost gone already. It’s the claws down his back that are causing him trouble. They’re knitting in jagged lines and stinging welts. It’s the claws down his back that have Derek worried, that have him basically pinning Isaac to the bleachers.

“Derek,” Isaac levels. “I’m fine. I’m healing. We need to go.”

The noises inside the school haven’t dwindled yet. The Beast is lingering inside, still terrorizing Beacon Hills like he terrorized Gevaudan.

Derek hesitates, like he really is considering staying put and forcing Isaac to do the same. But then, as if on cue, an echoing roar builds

from within the high school. It travels down hallways and past frantic students, over to the lacrosse field and under the bleachers.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Derek says, finally giving in. He pushes to his feet and helps Isaac up. (It’s completely unnecessary, but it’s sort of nice anyway.)

Together, they run into the school, loping around a corner and physically bumping into Liam. Isaac flinches backwards, wincing as the movement exacerbates the lacerations along his spine.

Liam takes one look at him and winces. “Yikes...”

The younger beta is fully healed. His lacrosse jersey is torn open, but the skin below is clean and unharmed. Isaac flushes with relief, but covers it with something lightly scathing, “I told you: your ‘act first, think later’ attitude was going to get you into trouble.”

Liam makes a face like, *I can’t believe you just said that*, and opens his mouth to retort, but gets cut off by another bellowing growl. This one is familiar and recognizable. This one is Scott.

They take off running, following the sound towards the library and bursting through the double doors.

Scott is covered in blood. He’s standing and his fangs are bared and his heart is beating, but he’s *covered* in red. He’s on the edge of the library steps, staring down the Beast with zero fear and zero self preservation.

Isaac freezes.

He’s hurt and scared and his mind is reeling back to the supermoon in the sky. And—

Liam lunges.

He holds both hands clasped together, jumping into the air and leaping at the Beast. It’s a repeat of the moment on the lacrosse field, but, this time, the Beast isn’t ready. And, this time, Liam lands a hit. He practically sucker punches the Beast across the face, throwing his entire weight at the chimera.

Liam falls to the ground as the Beast’s body turns with the force, thrown off and, for once, affected by the impact.

While the Beast is torn and unfocused, Isaac sprints by. He runs past Liam – who he already knows is fine – and towards the steps. He reaches for Scott without thinking, grabbing his wrist and pulling him steady. He catches Scott before he can fall. He pulls him in close, almost trying to shield Scott's body with his own.

Then, the gunfire begins.

Braeden marches into the library, flanked with Malia and Derek on either side. She starts to shoot. She aims bullet after bullet, hitting the Beast again and again. She doesn't stop and she doesn't relent.

Isaac yanks Scott away from the steps, off to the side and closer to Liam. He keeps his grip tight, doesn't let Scott get any ideas of taking off or joining in. Isaac holds Scott's wrist as Braeden's bullets force the Beast to turn away, tipping forward and nearly collapsing.

The Beast makes an almost wounded sound and leaps through the window of the library. Glass shatters everywhere, raining down over the stairs and ricocheting off walls and furniture. Cold air pours in through the opening, starting up a shivering chill of fear and dread.

The Beast disappears into the shadows of nightfall.

Isaac's grip on Scott's wrist turns into a stabilizing arm looped around his waist. Scott is significantly injured. He's maimed and dripping with blood. Mostly, Isaac can't make out where the cuts actually lie. Scott's skin is too smeared and mottled, but there's a gash along his hairline, a streaming of blood down his temple, cheek, and jaw. He looks horrible and hurt.

"You didn't seriously think you were going to have a chance against that thing, did you?" Isaac questions. It's meant to sound disapproving, but really it's just concern. There's no bitterness to his tone. He sounds soft even to his own ears.

"No," Scott pants, voice a deep rumbling in his chest. He rests a little heavier against Isaac. "But I got its scent."

—

Isaac was maybe a little too impatient with Derek. Because, now, Scott is trying to take off running after the Beast and Isaac is about ready to find some mountain ash to contain him with. Scott can hardly walk on his own, and yet he does it anyway, staggering after a trail that only he can follow.

“Scott, wait!” Isaac calls after him. “You’re hurt.”

Scott busts open a glass door of the school. He leans against the handle for a moment, breathless and exerted.

“You’ve gotta slow down,” Liam says. The others are back in the library still, but Isaac and Liam couldn’t let Scott go off on his own. They have a similar loyalty to Scott, an unwavering desire to stay at his side. It’s fueled by different feelings, sure, but it’s there all the same.

Scott doesn’t listen. He breaks off into a jog, crossing the parking lot with purposeful dedication. He passes each subsequent car with a turn of his head and a throwing out of his arm. He’s frantic and stumbling, but Isaac knows he’s found something to track. It’s evident in his posture, in the desperate urgency that comes with being so close, but still so far – when something is just out of reach, but could be pulled away at any moment.

And then, Scott stops. He makes it one footprint past a black sedan and stutters to halt. He takes a step back, gripping at the back of the car with determination and certainty. He doesn’t pause, just rips the trunk open, grunting at the force of the action.

There’s a pair of sneakers inside.

Isaac holds his breath as Scott reaches for one of the shoes. Going so slowly, he turns it over. The wait is agonizing, but the reveal is worse.

There’s blood on the sole and the same striped pattern of the partial print.

They’ve found the last chimera. Whoever’s car this is, they’re the Beast.

Isaac should feel relieved. This is what they’ve spent all night looking for. This is the information that could aid them in saving the teenager below, in stopping the Beast once and for all. Isaac should feel some sense of optimism, but he doesn’t. Instead, it’s a crushing weight of apprehension, some instinctual gut feeling of *wrong*.

Scott keeps the shoe, but slams the trunk closed.

Mason pops into view. They all jump at the sight. He’s standing in the parking lot, two feet away and staring at them with a confused sort of fright.

“Scott?” he says. “What are you doing to my car?”

Scott’s head tips to the side, a subtle shake and an aching want for *anything* else to be true. There’s denial coursing in Isaac’s veins, but there’s no way around it. There’s no avoiding what this means.

“It’s you.”

“What?” Mason asks, squinting and bewildered. He looks between the three of them, eyes landing on, “Liam, what’s he talking about?”

Liam has gone pale and silent. He’s looking at the ground. He won’t meet Mason’s eyes.

“*Liam?*”

It’s a shocking twist of fate. It’s history repeating. It’s a best friend turn possessed and taken over. It’s evil and cruel.

It’s him.

It’s Mason.

He’s the Beast.

Before anything can happen, before the realization can really sink in, Corey materializes. He comes un-invisible, peeling off a car and stepping up to Mason’s back. He gets his hands on him and they all know what’s about to happen.

“Corey,” Isaac calls, begs, pleads. “Corey, *wait*.”

For half a second, the pair seems to flicker in and out of sight. For half a second, Corey hesitates or second guesses. For half a second, Isaac thinks he’s gotten through.

But then, Corey and Mason disappear. They fade into nothing.

“Corey!” Scott yells and lunges forward, arms stretched out and searching desperately, but it’s too late. They’re already gone.

The Beast of Beacon Hills

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 19

Word count: 6,789

They have to force Scott to go home. Or, well, Isaac has to force him. He maintains physical contact with Scott every step of the way. Through the parking lot, into the back of the Jeep, and up the stairs to his bedroom. Isaac can hear the silent protests in Scott's every breath, but he doesn't yield.

He helps Scott up to his room and then helps him to lean back against his pillows. Scott grunts and pants, making aching noises of pain. He's still got blood down one side of his face, though it's beginning to dry now.

"We have to find them," Scott says. His eyes are dark with intensity. "It's Mason."

"I know," Isaac says, understanding and quietly calm. (On the inside, he's a mess of nerves, but Scott doesn't need to know that. Right now, Scott needs stability. Isaac's trying to provide that.) "Everybody's looking. We'll find them."

Scott exhales. He looks tired.

"We'll figure it out," Isaac says with certainty. He reaches out, placing a hand over Scott's arm. He pulls in tendrils of pain. Black traces like vines on his skin, around his arm and up under his sleeve.

"You shouldn't do that," Scott says, but doesn't pull his arm away.

Isaac hums in question as pain absorbs into his nerves and muscles. It hurts, but it's a distant thing, a dull throb in the back of his mind.

"You're hurt too," Scott explains.

And it's true. The jagged cut still rests along Isaac's spine, but it's not bothering him as much anymore. It's just as distant as the pain he leeches from Scott.

Isaac shrugs, "I'm okay," but he lets go of Scott's arm anyway.

Scott seems to sigh and sag in relief, which, really, it should be the opposite. Having his pain drawn out through his skin should bring him comfort, *not* Isaac letting go.

“Right now, you’re not going anywhere until you heal, okay?” Isaac says. He lifts his eyebrows and meets Scott’s eyes straight on.

“You too,” Scott answers.

“What?”

“I’m not going anywhere until you heal too,” Scott says.

Isaac ignores the way that makes his heart pound. Only says, “Okay,” and, “Get some rest. Maybe clean the blood off your face?”

Scott smiles. “Eh, I’ve looked worse.”

Isaac pointedly doesn’t think about his dead, dead, dead body. Instead, he huffs a shallow laugh and turns to leave the room.

“Isaac?”

He pauses in the doorway. “Yeah?”

Scott doesn’t say anything.

Isaac looks over his shoulder. Scott is staring at him with blood on his face and a sparkle of feeling in the rich brown of his eyes. It makes Isaac feel warm all over.

“Scott?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing.”

Isaac nods. There’s disappointment swimming in his stomach. He doesn’t know why.

—

Isaac closes the door behind him, careful to push it into place with only a quiet click of the latch. He turns down the hall and finds Stiles waiting for him.

He’s giving Isaac a *look*.

It’s assessing and questioning. It’s searching deep and curious. It’s

knowing and understanding.

Isaac nods.

He's not sure what he's agreeing to. He's not sure what he's telling Stiles. He's not sure, but he gives his affirmation anyway.

Stiles nods back.

Then, together, they head toward the stairs. Malia, Braeden, and Derek stand at the bottom, not dissimilar to the way Stiles was waiting for Isaac. Stiles sees them, but carries on down the steps without a care.

Isaac pauses at the top.

Stiles jogs halfway down the staircase before he properly notices the tension in the others, the way they're looking at him with a swirling mixture of worry, apology, and something resolute.

"What?" Stiles asks, pausing with his hand on the banister. "What? What did I do?"

"Tell him," Braeden says, speaking to Malia with a jerk of her head.

There's a moment of hesitation. Isaac looks past Stiles and over to Derek. He looks at him with something imploring and confused, but Derek stays blank in his expression. He gives nothing away. He looks the most apologetic of the three. Isaac doesn't like that.

"You know how my mother wants to kill me?" Malia prompts. Because, apparently, that's a normal sentence in Isaac's reality.

Stiles gives the smallest of nods.

Brusque and to the point, Malia says, "I think she might want to kill you too."

"Okay, uhh. That's... disconcerting," Stiles says, though he doesn't actually sound all that freaked out. He doesn't even sound surprised. Just jumps into, "I should probably have a gun."

Malia turns to Braeden.

Braeden looks between Stiles and Malia, expression twisted and eyes lit up with her incredulity. She's looking at them like they've gone off the deep end, like she can't believe what she's hearing. "I'm *not* giving

you a gun.”

“*You* have a gun,” Stiles says. Braeden tips her head to one side and drops her eyebrows in an impatient, unimpressed stare. (She’s been spending too much time with Derek.) Still, Stiles continues in his argument, seeming more bothered by her lack of faith in him than the knowledge that, “The Desert Wolf, *who* is trying to kill me, has a gun.” He’s blinking rapidly. “I *think* I should probably have a gun.”

Braeden squints. She turns less denying and more considering. “Do you even know how to use a gun?”

Stiles glowers, crossing his arms. “Did you *seriously* just say that to the son of a cop?”

—

Isaac takes a nap on the couch for a couple hours, but, other than that, he doesn’t get much sleep. He passes the time worrying about Mason and Corey and fighting the urge to check on Scott until, eventually, the sun rises and morning breaks over the horizon.

The pack – minus Scott – gathers in the kitchen, coming up with a plan to divide and conquer. Isaac tries not to think about the plan to break Lydia out of Eichen House. She’s standing to Isaac’s left, perfectly well and safe and *here*.

Mostly, Isaac listens and breathes in the too strong scent of coffee.

“My dad’s got an APB out,” Stiles starts.

“For a 5’8” sixteen year old?” Kira questions, a hint of disbelieving laughter in her words.

“I recommended nine-foot tall rampaging werewolf,” Stiles says, sarcastic as ever, voice lilting with the absurdity of it all.

Isaac cracks a smile.

“It still might not be him,” Liam says. He’s sitting on one of the wooden stools. He looks like he hasn’t slept in weeks, like last night’s events have worn him down to nothing.

Nobody says anything. The rest of the group shares in looks of pity, at each other and at Liam. There’s a bit of guilt in how obviously sorry they feel for him, but, really, his denial is a pathetic thing. As much as

they don't want the Beast to be Mason, they can't explain away the car full of evidence.

Liam tips his head towards his chest, deflating under the sadness of their collective attention. "But Hayden's at the school looking."

"I can keep checking the woods," Malia suggests. She brings an optimism to her tone. It's sweet, in a way. Malia is usually one of the first to turn despondent or hopeless, but she's trying. For Liam and for Mason and for the pack as a whole.

"My mom can check all the hospitals in the county," Scott's voice enters the room and then his body follows.

He stands on the edge of the kitchen. The pack immediately responds to his presence, straightening up and pivoting to face him like sunflowers toward the sun. Isaac scents the air for blood, but there's no traces. Scott has healed.

"We can find him," Scott says, joining their circle around the kitchen island with intense motivation, with determination, with *hope*.

"What happens then?" Liam asks.

Scott looks at Liam and speaks with conviction, with no room for argument or failure, "We figure out a way to save him."

"Okay," Lydia says, nodding vaguely. "Where else could we look?"

The question doesn't get answered because, just then, the back door bursts open and Corey runs in. He's breathless and frantic, eyes wide and staring right at Isaac. Words pour out of him like a dam that's been broken, "They took him and I couldn't do anything. It's not my fault, I swear. They *took* him—"

"Who?" Scott interrupts, urgent and desperate and maybe a little bit unkind.

Corey exhales the air in his lungs. His eyes flit to Scott and the rest of the pack, but they fall back on Isaac to say, "The Dread Doctors."

—

The plan is as follows: Kira is going to get her sword, Scott and Liam are going to talk to Theo about the Dread Doctors, and everyone else is going to try to cover all the places Mason could show up. Hayden is

at the school, Corey is at his house, Stiles is at the station, and Derek, Malia, and Braeden are staying at the McCall household.

Meanwhile, Isaac is at the hospital with Melissa.

As is the case with most of their plans, there's a lot of waiting involved. Melissa is still working her shift, but the hospital is relatively slow today, so she sticks close to Isaac, filling the quiet with soft questions like, "How are you doing, Isaac? I know September was a hard month for you."

Isaac nods and shrugs at the same time. "Ask me again after we've saved Mason?"

It's the best answer Isaac can give. He can't bring himself to lie to Melissa, but he can't be truly honest with her either. Not when he looks at her and all he sees is Scott. Not when he aches for her approval in a foreign, vulnerable way.

Melissa tilts her head to the side, eyes turn a little appraising, but still sensitive and sympathetic. "It's hard," she says, "what you all put yourselves through."

Isaac clears his throat. "It's worth it."

"Is it?" Melissa asks. She's staring at Isaac with an intensity in her gaze, but it's all kindness and genuine wonder. She's not baiting or tracking or tricking.

"It got me out of—" *the freezer* "—that house."

Melissa pales. She goes a little gray around the edges. She looks like she wants to coo at him or apologize. Or worse, some combination of the two.

She doesn't.

In fact, she doesn't say anything at all. She fades into eerie silence. It sets Isaac's nerves on fire.

"I used to think that nobody would ever figure it out or try to help," Isaac says. He's not sure what he's talking about or why he decided to open his mouth, but Melissa just has that effect on him. "I used to think that, one day, I would disappear and nobody would notice or ask why. I used to think I wouldn't see the end of high school. And, yeah, I still think that sometimes, but the difference is... is... now, I

want to see the end of high school.”

Isaac doesn't miss the way Melissa's eyes go glassy, but she still doesn't make any sad noises or empty condolences. She looks like she wants to pull him into a hug, but she doesn't do that either. Isaac regrets that for the both of them, just a little bit. (The larger part of Isaac is appreciative, grateful for the way Melissa fights her instincts for his sake, even if it is mostly unnecessary.)

Melissa smiles at him, a little shaky, and says, “Scott tells me you applied to UC Davis.”

Isaac smiles back at her, close-lipped and a little rocky, but real nonetheless. “Yeah. Yeah, I did. I – I mailed in my application the other day.”

Melissa's features erupt with joy. “Did you really? Oh, Isaac, that's amazing. Do you know what you want to study? You have time to figure that out, of course, but—”

“Mythology,” Isaac says. Then, when it sounds too definitive and certain to his own ears, “I think.”

There's a flicker in Melissa's eyes. “And that's because you really enjoy it, right? Not because you think it would help,” she lowers her voice, “around here?”

Isaac exhales a soft breath of laughter, touched at Melissa's concern. “I mean, yes, it will be helpful, but, no. I... I enjoy it.”

The doubt dwindles and Melissa transforms in her enthusiasm. Isaac doesn't know how to handle seeing someone *that* happy just for him.

—

They've been here for at least an hour and Isaac is starting to get restless in his anticipation. He's never been very patient, but it's even harder to pretend when Mason and countless lives are at stake.

“He wasn't on the genetic chimera list,” Isaac says. When the silence gets too stifling and the nagging thought finally gets the better of him.

“What?” Melissa asks, looking up from her computer screen.

“Mason,” Isaac clarifies. “He wasn't on the genetic chimera list.”

Melissa frowns. “But he has to be, right? Isn't that the big

requirement?”

“There has to be something we missed,” Isaac says. He looks at Melissa, meeting her eyes with an implication and a request simmering underneath the surface. He won’t come right out and say it. He can’t face the rejection and he doesn’t want to put her in an uncomfortable position but...

“Well,” Melissa says – *whispers*. “We’ll just have to look again.”

And so, they do. Melissa ushers them towards the back room where medical records are kept in organized storage. She uses her key card to let them in, buzzing against the reader and turning the light green.

The two of them duck past the heavy door, making quick glances over their shoulders, hoping not to get caught.

Melissa moves with the practiced efficiency of someone who’s worked in this hospital for years, who knows her way around the shelves and understands the confusing filing system.

Isaac just follows her lead.

She moves like a gust of wind sweeping through the room, a flurry of frantic movement and rustling pages until, “Got it.”

She pulls a manila folder from the shelf. It’s pretty thin, not many records of Mason visiting the hospital in his seventeen years, but there’s something there that makes Melissa gasp. It’s not a loud or dramatic sound, just a quick inhalation of breath, a sucking in through her teeth, a near wince.

“What is it?” Isaac asks.

“Mason was born with twin embolization syndrome.”

Isaac stares at her blankly.

“It means he had a vanishing twin in utero,” Melissa says, which is maybe bringing Isaac closer to understanding, but, still, he screws his face up in confusion.

“Can you – Can you explain please?” he asks.

“He ate his twin,” Melissa says, four staccato words tied together with an invisible string.

Isaac replicates Melissa's quietly shocked gasp. "Is that... What does that mean? Is it important?"

"I don't know," Melissa admits. "But it's just weird enough that it must mean something. There's gotta be some significance."

Isaac nods, can't help but agree. And he knows who Melissa needs to talk to. Isaac might be gaining knowledge about the supernatural, but he's not a detective and he never will be.

"We need to tell Stiles and Lydia about this," he says. "They're at the station."

Melissa nods and makes towards the door to the record room, but then Isaac's phone rings. She makes a hectic shushing sound, gesturing for Isaac to turn it off or hurry up and answer the call.

It's Scott, so, of course, Isaac answers. He keeps his voice tipped low, but not quite whispering. "Hi."

"Hey. We just spoke to Theo. He wants us to meet him at the operating theater. He said to bring the map of telluric currents. Do you still have one?" Scott asks, getting straight to business.

Isaac nods, "Yeah, yeah, I do."

"Can you get it and meet us there?"

Isaac looks over at Melissa. She's paused by the door, making quick glances out of the glass window every few seconds. When Isaac falls into quiet, she turns more fully on him. She whispers, basically just mouths, "You need to go with them."

Isaac takes the permission for what it is and says, "Yeah, sure."

"Okay," Scott says. *"Thanks. See you soon."*

"See you," Isaac echoes.

Then, he hangs up the phone.

Melissa reaches for the doorknob, but, again, Isaac doesn't let her go yet.

"You still don't trust Liam." He says it as a declarative statement. There's no question or wondering. It's a fact.

Melissa cuts her eyes toward him. She looks faintly annoyed, but Isaac does his best not to waver under the heat.

“I trust Liam,” she says, heart staying steady. “I just don’t trust him *and* Theo alone with Scott. I’d just. I’d feel better if you were there.” And, “Wouldn’t you?”

Isaac nods. Yeah. Yeah, he would.

—

Scott and Liam don’t go inside to meet with Theo until Isaac gets there. They stand outside the operating theater, waiting and a little antsy.

Isaac holds up the folded map as he approaches, indicating that he’s brought what was requested.

There’s no catching up or conspiring. They can’t say anything out here. Not when they can hear Theo’s heart beating inside, not when they know he can hear them just as clearly.

So, in silence, they enter the operating theater. They find Theo standing in front of an empty glass tank.

“They called him *Der Soldat*,” Theo says, slipping into an accent. “It’s German for ‘The Soldier.’ I’m pretty sure he fought in World War II.”

Scott looks between Theo and the tank as the meaning of the words becomes immediately clear. “He was a nazi.”

“*And* an alpha werewolf,” Theo states.

Scott, Isaac, and Liam all turn to look at each other for a quick second. Their expressions are a mixture of horror and confusion.

“The Dread Doctors were using him to prolong their lives. They’ve been doing it for decades,” Theo explains. Isaac really hopes he’s getting to the point here. “Actually, probably longer.”

“How old *are* these guys?” Liam asks. He looks a little twitchy, body jerking forward and arms swaying at his sides.

“Who knows,” Theo says, like it’s completely inconsequential. “But wherever they go, he goes too.”

“How do we find him?” Liam asks. He’s doing most of the important

talking and it's setting Isaac on edge, just a little. Like Melissa, Isaac trusts Liam. He just doesn't trust this combination, this perfect evil.

"Keeping him alive requires a... pretty unique set of conditions," Theo says. He looks from Liam to Scott. (Isaac resists the urge to step between them. Barely.) "There's gotta be a power source, it has to be underground, and on—"

The realization sets in. Isaac takes the map out of his pocket again, "And on a telluric current."

Theo reaches out to take the map from him. Isaac pulls it back. Because he's petty and he revels in the rush of power. Theo only scoffs and smiles one of those infuriating grins, then he nods his head forward as if to say, *it's all you*.

Isaac rolls his eyes, but unfolds the page. Black lines intersect across the map of Beacon Hills, all converging on a single point in the center. A point labeled with: **Beacon Hills Preserve**.

Theo smirks, "Looks like we're going for a hike."

Isaac only narrowly avoids the urge to punch that smug look right off his face.

—

The trek through the woods is awkwardly quiet and gets dark fast. Isaac tries not to let his worry show, but this whole thing makes him nervous. Mason being missing is one thing, but relying on *Theo* to find him?

Yeah, Isaac isn't feeling too optimistic.

He's trying to hide his worries and keep his head up. He's trying not to be obvious in the way that he hasn't taken his eyes off of Theo for longer than five seconds at a time. (And, in each of those intervals, he turns his attention onto Scott, searching for something within him. Though what that is, Isaac doesn't know.)

"Where is he?" Scott asks, speaking to Theo.

"I thought we were looking for him," Theo fires back, being purposefully obtuse.

Scott's voice is as dark as the night sky, his urgency as fast paced as

their strides. “You *know* who I’m talking about.”

Isaac doesn’t, but he listens close anyway.

“Deucalion?” Theo reveals. He doesn’t look at Scott and he doesn’t let his voice shift with any uncertainty.

“You shouldn’t trust him,” Scott says. And it’s funny because it’s true. Scott is playing the concerned alpha, the person who cares about everyone. When, in reality, Scott is pulling a fast one on Theo. In reality, Theo *shouldn’t* trust Deucalion.

And he shouldn’t trust Scott either.

(That exhilarating power surge returns, simmering in Isaac’s stomach. There’s a flare of pride there too. There’s a thrill to watching Scott like this, in his element and walking the line between deceit and honesty. There’s a satisfaction in being included, in being the one person who knows what’s going to happen.)

“You’re the one that let him live,” Theo says, pinning the blame on someone else and taking zero responsibility – as usual.

And it’s funny because Scott is letting Theo live too. Scott could take Theo down in seconds, but he won’t because he’s too good for that. Because Theo isn’t worth that. Because he’s so irrelevant. Because he’s a speck on the horizon.

“I’m not a murderer,” Scott says. Theo is *lucky* it’s true.

“You still think you’re going to get through *all* of this without killing anyone?” Theo snarks. There’s a bite to his words and an insinuation that he *knows* this is Scott’s greatest fear. He’s trying to wiggle his way into the cracks again.

Isaac’s hackles rise and he’s ready to jump to Scott’s defense, but then Scott replies with a casual, uncaring, “I didn’t say that.”

Isaac knows it’s not that simple. He knows Theo is right about Scott’s fear of himself and his power. But Scott doesn’t let that show. And, again, Isaac is proud of him.

Liam suddenly stops walking. He’s looking down at the ground, lips curled in disgust or apprehension or both. “We’re close,” he says.

“You get his scent?” Scott asks.

Liam blinks up, looking only at Scott. He nods, but doesn't say anything. He's hesitating and Isaac knows exactly why.

"Which way?" Theo – the reason – asks.

Liam still doesn't look at Theo. There's an anger in his eyes. Something bitter and broken down, something closed off and hollow. He's tired and he's scared and he trusted Theo.

Now, he doesn't trust himself around Theo. And he knows nobody else does either.

(That hurts Isaac in a way he can't explain. That brings guilt to his windpipe and makes him clear his throat in that unfortunate habit of his.)

"You think you're going to leave me behind?" Theo questions. He's blinking rapidly, frustration bubbling up, unable to maintain his usual infuriating calm.

Liam's eyes don't soften.

Scott says, "Liam..."

"Look, he wants to *kill* him," Liam says, taking a step towards Scott. He's staying as level as he can manage, clearly trying to appear rational and worth hearing out.

"I just want his power," Theo says, as if that makes any sense, as if power can be taken without the presence of death. "You want to fight someone that *actually* wants to kill Mason? Go fight Parrish."

Isaac has to swallow down a growl.

Parrish does *not* want to kill Mason. Parrish is good and kind and... and a hero.

"Who did you see when you put on the mask?" Liam asks, finally looking at Theo.

He's talking about the Dread Doctor's mask. Because, of course, Theo took it from Eichen. And, of course, he put it on. The guy only cares about himself and power and he'll do anything to get his hands on it. (It reminds Isaac of Peter, which, really, isn't a great comparison to make. He shouldn't let his mind go there. He'll just end up standing on sand again, clearing his throat for the umpteenth time)

"I already told you it wasn't Mason," Theo counters, purposefully vague and indirect.

"Who was it?" Liam snaps, having no patience for Theo and his games.

Theo looks to Scott. For a moment, he actually looks imploring, like he's looking to Scott to get him out of this. It's so misguided that it's almost amusing. Almost. Theo ruins Isaac's glimmer of entertainment when he opens his mouth.

"I saw a man dying in the snow. He was impaled on a spear."

They all know what that means. It's unsettling and terrifying, but Isaac isn't going to give that away. Not to Theo. So, he says, "It's not a spear, you idiot. It's called a pike."

Isaac doesn't reveal how he knows that, but he makes quick eye contact with Scott and Liam. (They all heard the abridged version of the story from Lydia and Derek. Isaac had been right about Gerard knowing the name of the human side of the Beast. His name was Sebastien Valet and he was Marie-Jeanne's sister, which is just a twisting of the knife, of the Argent reputation built on deceit and betrayal.)

"Then you know what it means," Theo says, arms thrown up. "Time's running out!" Then, loud and snarking and entitled, "Where is he, Liam? What direction?"

Liam doesn't give in right away. He stands his ground for a moment, features back to that lip curling expression and the stony anger. Again, he looks to Scott.

Scott gives a subtle nod of his head, a slight tilting to the side movement. It's a relinquishing of control almost. It's an expression of letting Liam decide their next step while also indicating that they might not have any other choice than to let Theo come along.

Or maybe Isaac is reading too much into it and it's just a nod.

Liam sighs and stomps ahead, brushing past Theo with a short, "This way."

So, they follow Liam through another stretch of woods. Liam moves with quick purpose, finding a shed mostly surrounded and hidden among a circle of trees. He reaches for the door without pausing, but

Scott grabs his shoulder and pulls him back just in time.

“Listen,” Scott says.

And they all do.

There’s a racing heartbeat inside. Only one.

“It’s him.”

It’s Mason.

Liam opens the door and runs inside without another moment’s pause. Scott grabs the door before it can slam closed, but he doesn’t rush in after. He hesitates outside, blocking the entrance with the faint scent of regret pooling around him.

He’s worried that Mason will be hurt and it will be his fault. He’s worried that they’re too late, but also that they’re moving too quickly. Isaac knows because his doubts and fears are the same.

But they can’t stand out here forever.

Isaac gives a soft nudge to Scott’s back. Scott looks over his shoulder and Isaac nods. Then, together, the three of them follow Liam into the shed and through to the basement.

It’s much more spacious than Isaac would have expected from the exterior. The stairs are mottled with dust and plants grow down from above, wrapping around the banister and tickling Isaac’s ankles.

“*Mason?*” Liam hisses into the green-lit darkness.

There’s no answer, but they don’t need one. They find Mason quickly. They round the corner and the room opens up to stone floor and damp scent and scientific equipment.

Mason is sitting on the ground, leaning back against a vat of shiny green liquid. It’s bright and unnatural, too close to the glow of a firefly to feel safe. What’s worse is that it’s not just the mystery fluid inside. The alpha nazi werewolf is inside too, skin looking flaky and disgusting and wrong.

Liam runs forward, dropping to his knees at his best friend’s side, once again calling out in a quiet voice of, “Mason.”

It’s then that Isaac notices it. Mason’s head is tilted forward, chin

almost touching his chest, and there's a plug protruding from his neck. It's gouged into his cervical spine, thick around and way too big.

Isaac follows the line of tubing up from Mason's neck to where it joins with the tank.

"It's connected to him."

Scott and Liam kneel in front of Mason while Isaac and Theo stand a few steps away. Theo because he doesn't care about Mason and Isaac because he's scared to hurt him by closing in. He doesn't want to box Mason in, doesn't want to make him panic and thrash against the plug. He doesn't want to get too close, doesn't want to jar or hurt him or make things worse.

"What is this thing?" Liam whispers. His voice is frail and faint with emotion, speaking to the room at large.

Unexpectedly, it's Theo that answers, "I don't know."

Isaac can't decide whether he believes him or not. Theo's proven he's a good liar, he's proven he can steady his heartbeat of jumps and blips. He looks a little impatient, but he looks as freaked out as the rest of them. Though, that could be a facade too.

"Liam," Mason's voice comes just as weak as his friend's, if not even more so. It shatters something in Isaac. He thinks he'd prefer it if Mason was unconscious. "I can feel it." Mason is gasping, "It's in my skull."

The vat of green liquid bubbles and whirs. Isaac's stomach does the same. He feels nauseous. He feels like he's going to be sick, like there's neon green bile in his throat.

"Don't move," Liam says. He sounds terrified, but like he's trying to be calm for Mason.

"Careful," Scott breathes, eyes pouring over the vat and Mason and the plug in his neck. He's trying to figure out their next step forward, he's calculating the risk and assessing the options.

(They don't have many. In fact, they might not have any at all.)

"What are they doing to him?" Liam bites, glaring back at Theo.

"I don't know," Theo repeats, voice tinting with a defensive, reactionary rage.

"Guys, let's focus," Scott says, looking between Theo and Liam with something disapproving. Isaac takes a small step closer, but not by much. "Mason," Scott says, softer. "We're gonna get you out of here."

Scott looks at Isaac. Their eyes lock and there's so much fear there. There's so much 'what if' and worst case scenario.

And Isaac can't stay away. He bridges the gap and kneels down on the other side of Mason, next to Liam, but still not touching.

Scott looks between Isaac and Liam. His mouth opens and closes a few times, like he's unsure, like he's questioning if he should go through with this. In the end, he does, saying, "Hold him still."

Liam and Isaac share a sideways glance and then do as they're told.

"Okay, all right," Scott says, a little breathless, pumping himself up. "I'm going to try to pull it out." Scott holds his hand out, just on the edge of grabbing the plug, "Let me know if it hurts."

Scott wraps his hand around the tubing. Almost immediately, Mason starts to scream. It's a deep sound, a primal noise of instinct, a grating agony from within.

Isaac is shaking too much to find focus, fumbling too much to take Mason's pain. He's in the most dire of moments and he's failing. Mason is yelling, gasping, and shouting, "It hurts! It definitely hurts!"

Scott lets go.

Then, a familiar clicking sound fills the basement. It's unnatural and inhuman. It's grinding and droning, like the purr of a motor or the spinning of gears.

It's the Dread Doctors.

Isaac turns to look over his shoulder, sees the three of them standing there. As usual, the air around them is crackling and thick. It feels static, like the feeling in the air before a storm. It feels hazy and blurry and dry.

"Liam, try to get that thing out of his neck," Scott calls without turning away from the Doctors.

Liam reaches for the plug. Isaac could stand, he could help in the inevitable fight, but he doesn't. Instead, he stays with Liam. He stays as support for the two best friends. He stays to keep holding Mason still and doubles down in his efforts to draw in his pain.

"Theo..." the voice of one of the Dread Doctors echoes in the cavernous space of the basement. There's stomping footsteps and the tapping of a cane against the ground. "Theo Raeken."

"He's coming with us," Theo says.

The Dread Doctor just says, "Failure..." And, "Theo Raeken."

"I-I'm not a failure," Theo says. For the first time, he isn't smug or confident. For the first time, he's fragile and scared. For the first time, he sounds real.

"Liam..." Mason grabs his wrist. His voice is still rough and strained, but, with conviction, he says, "Get out of here. Just go."

The Dread Doctors are coming closer.

"Not a complete failure," the Doctor says in that breathy, artificial tone. "We learned from you."

"Theo," Isaac hears Scott whisper, hears him say, "he's trying to get to you."

And it's working. Isaac keeps his eyes on Mason, on the pulling of pain, but Theo's heart is hammering in his chest. His usually serene and stagnant chemosignals are going crazy, flashing from anger to betrayal to fear to hurt to... *Is that grief?*

"This is what they want. Don't give it to them," Scott says, a little louder, a little more desperate. "We can't beat them."

"The mark of a true failure," the Dread Doctor drones. "Repeating the same mistake again and again."

"We're taking Mason," Theo says. He's no longer fragile or weak. He's hardened and dark. "Then I'm taking what's mine."

He growls and Isaac doesn't have to look to know that his claws and fangs are out. He doesn't have to look to know that they should've listened to Liam and left Theo behind.

"Let him go," Theo orders. He snarls again, a rumbling in his throat.

“You have the entitlement and narcissism typical of your generation. In that, you are a profound success,” the Dread Doctor croons. Which, Isaac thinks, is a little rich coming from the guy who feels entitled to stealing teenagers out of their homes for the sake of human experimentation. But, you know, whatever.

Liam takes hold of the plug again. The tension in the room is rising. Either, the Dread Doctors are going to attack or Theo is. They’re running out of time. Mason screams through clenched teeth, mouth torn open as sound rips from his diaphragm.

“Scott!” Liam calls, “I can’t get it out, I don’t know what to do.”

So unsure, so worried, so young.

“But your failure taught us one thing,” the Dread Doctor continues, basically ignoring Liam. “The banality of evil. That you were and would always be an ordinary evil.”

“You think I’m ordinary?” Theo questions. Isaac can just imagine his sneer and the danger in his golden-but-should-be-blue eyes.

“We believed that in order to resurrect the perfect killer we had to start with the perfect evil.” For a moment, they stop trying to free Mason and simply listen. “From you, we learned true evil only comes by corrupting something truly good.”

“Not something,” Scott says, shaking his head and staring at Liam, gaining his attention.

Liam looks back at the feeble form of Mason.

“Someone.”

Then, the Dread Doctor’s gloved hand is stretched out towards Theo. There’s a faint blue glow and the whirring of electricity.

Theo attacks. He starts punching the Doctor, landing hit after hit with a metallic clank against his fist. And it must be hurting, but he doesn’t stop. Even as the Dread Doctor shows no sign of injury or slowing down.

Liam looks back and forth between Mason and the fight. There’s a strange moment – one that Isaac won’t understand till years down the line – when Liam abandons Mason’s side. He jumps into the fight. He starts helping Theo.

For now, Isaac explains it as an outlet for his growing anger.

“Liam, wait!” Scott calls after his beta, but he doesn’t listen.

Liam starts battling one of the Dread Doctors, and then Scott is on his feet and following after him, protests dying as the fighting really begins.

Isaac sighs, presses to stand, and flicks out his claws. He attacks just as readily as the others, falling into rhythm besides Scott and scratching down metal armor with a scraping, grating sound.

“Liam!” Distantly, Isaac hears Mason yelling. Distantly, he sees Liam pulled into a headlock. “Liam!”

Scott gets knocked to the ground by one of the Doctors. Soon after, Isaac is thrown down beside him. Then, Liam joins them too.

They’re losing. And the thing is: they knew they would.

Mason’s screams start to intensify. Time goes funny, slowing down for the dramatic effect of the moment. Mason is pushing himself up. He’s standing against the plug in his neck and spine and skull. He’s grunting and shouting in pain, but he isn’t giving up. He’s rising to a stand and yanking the tube from his neck and...

“Transformation...”

Billowing black smoke pools at Mason’s feet, swirling around and pulling in towards his body.

“Transformation without frequency.”

The shadows are gaining in height. Mason is swallowed by the darkness, leaving only his eyes in sight, eyes that begin to glow with a familiar purple hue.

“Mason!” Liam shouts.

Mason grunts and disappears, fading into the blackness and voice distorting with, “That’s not my name.”

Then, the Beast stands before them.

It growls and howls and *attacks*.

The Beast kills the first Doctor with shocking efficiency and a splatter

of blood. It tosses the body aside and grabs a second, piercing claws through armor and hoisting the Dread Doctor off his feet.

The Beast decapitates the second Doctor. The head rolls across the floor.

The chimera rounds on the final Dread Doctor. With large claws and a dominating hand, the Beast swats Theo out of the way like he's nothing more than a pesky fly. The Beast stomps towards its creator with a menacing grumble building low in its chest.

“Success.”

The Beast impales the Doctor on its claws, dragging his body out of the basement and into the preserve.

Isaac's heart is beating frantic in his chest. His eyes are wide in a stunned kind of horror, and, when he looks at Scott and Liam, he finds his expression mirrored in their faces.

They don't hesitate to jump to their feet and follow after the Beast. The night air hits their skin with a shock of cold, but it's nothing compared to the visual.

The Doctor, who none of them could beat, is dropped to the ground, limp and nearly lifeless. The Beast took out the Dread Doctors in mere seconds. And it's not finished.

The fiery form of Parrish swings at the Beast, landing a punch along his jowls, but the Beast punches back. It roars and bellows, straining towards the hellhound.

Then, gunfire.

Argent and Gerard step out of the cover of the forest. Argent holds a gun in his grip, shooting repeatedly, one bullet after the other. He doesn't waver or wobble or hesitate.

The Beast turns towards the bridge (the one where Theo's sister died) and starts to retreat.

The gunfire keeps going until it's too much for the Beast to take.

Shadowy smoke fills the air once more and, this time, when the transformation is complete, it's not Mason that's standing there.

“La Bête du Gevuadan,” Gerard calls, voice gritty and not at all scared.

Isaac is distantly aware that this is his first time seeing the old man since the night Jackson was saved from the kanima, the night Gerard tried to kill Derek, tried to kill Scott, tried to kill them all – every single person Isaac cares about. “I know your name. Do you remember mine?”

The man takes one look at Gerard, and, in a thick French accent, says, “Argent.”

Then, he takes off running into the preserve. He disappears too quickly for them to stop him, but Parrish follows fast, leaving a blaze of smoke and embers in his wake.

“Who the hell was that?” Scott asks, though Isaac has a feeling he already knows. They all do, actually. They just don’t want to believe it.

“You’ve seen the Beast of Gevaudan,” Gerard says, unhelpfully. “That was the man.”

Argent looks to his left, piercing blue eyes reflecting the shine of the nearly full moon. He says, “Sebastien Valet.”

Mason is gone.

Apotheosis

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 5 episode 20

Word count: 6,693

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

One of the Dread Doctors – apparently called the Surgeon (*stupidest. name. ever.*) – is propped up between Isaac and Liam. Scott opens the door to the animal clinic, helping them drag the Doctor inside where Deaton and Stiles stand in wait for them.

They pull the Doctor into the building after dragging him for at least a mile out of the preserve because, “He’s still alive.”

They get the Dread Doctor on the examination table, allowing Dr. Deaton to get a good look at him.

“Can you *keep* him alive?” Scott asks. It’s what they’ve all been thinking since the moment they found him, heart faintly beating and breathing slow. The Doctor could be useful.

“I’m not sure he technically *is* alive,” Deaton answers. Which, really, Isaac’s not sure why a technicality matters right now.

“Screw keeping him alive. How do we get him to talk?” Liam questions. He’s worried about Mason, so much so that it’s a tangible feeling. And, with Liam, his emotions usually present as anger. It’s simmering under the surface of skin, ready to be unleashed at the first sign of justification.

“Personally, I don’t think we utilize torture enough,” Stiles says.

And Isaac knows he’s joking, but he still rounds on him so fast he gives himself whiplash. He stares at Stiles, mouth dropped open in something smug, and, “You are *such* a hypocrite, you know that?”

Liam ignores them, asking, “Did you hear that?”

Isaac must have spoken over the sound because he didn’t hear

anything. Now, though, he trains his ears with a little more intent and focus.

“Come to me...” A voice speaks from outside the clinic. *“To me...”*

Then, the Surgeon sits up. He launches himself upright, body stiff and back ramrod straight. It reminds Isaac of Lydia, of her dying scream and shattered glass windows. Not dissimilarly, the Dread Doctor emits a high-pitched piercing sound. It drowns out every other noise in the clinic. Isaac can’t even hear himself think, can only clamp his hands over his ears and squeeze his eyes shut on instinct.

The whole room starts to vibrate and shake. Metal shelves slam against brick walls and glass bottles jostle and spin. Isaac feels like he’s being pushed towards the ground. He tries to fight against it, tries to stay standing, but, in the end, he hunches forward, bending at the waist and caving in.

The Dread Doctor gets off the table with a stomping drop. He starts towards the door, leaving chaos in his wake.

“Liam, wait!”

Scott’s yell breaks through the haze of shrieking noise and rumbling floors. Isaac sees Liam charging towards the Doctor, sees the Surgeon hold out a gloved hand, sees his fingertips glow blue with electricity.

Then, there’s an explosion of frequency. Like a forcefield, it shoves Liam back, sending him flying through the air and colliding with the back wall.

Liam falls to the ground, panting and disoriented.

They hear more than see the Dread Doctor disappear. They hear the sound of heavy boots hitting the ground and then the exterior door slams shut.

They have less than a second to duck.

All the metal objects in the room barrel towards the door as if pulled in by a magnet. Isaac shoves Stiles out of the way of a flying table and they crouch down together.

Then, stillness.

Isaac is breathless and slow, but Liam and Scott are breathless and

fast. They run towards the pile of metal and the door, reaching out to start sifting through, but—

“Stop!” Deaton calls. They skid to a halt. By the door, sparks are raining down and crackling. Deaton points, says, “It’s electrified.”

They’re trapped, as is often the case in Isaac’s life.

Probably unnecessarily, Isaac extends a hand to help Stiles up. Stiles, unexpectedly, doesn’t swat him away. He lets Isaac grab his arm and pull him to his feet.

“Marcel.”

The voice carries into the animal clinic again, speaking the name of a character who didn’t exist in Derek’s story, but did in Lydia’s version. Marcel was an ally of the Beast, of the man, of Sebastien. He covered for Sebastien, almost took the blame for it all.

“If this is what immortality looks like, I think you have been misled.”

“For you...” A second voice speaks. It’s the Surgeon, it’s Marcel, but he’s more human than they’ve ever heard him before. *“All for you...”*

“What did you do with it, Marcel?” Then, emphasized and disjointed, *“Where is the pike?”*

“The Argents,” Marcel says. Repeats feebly, *“The... Argents.”*

And maybe Scott shouldn’t, maybe he should wait until they know for certain that Sebastien is out of earshot, but it likely won’t matter. He’ll just as easily figure it out on his own. So, Scott whispers the epiphany, a hushed breath of, “The cane.”

Isaac remembers it. He remembers the sound of the Dread Doctor walking, two metal boots and the click of a third step, the beat of a cane hitting the ground. He doesn’t remember seeing it after the fight, doesn’t remember where it went in the aftermath, but Liam does.

“They took it,” he says. Argent and Gerard, “They took it.”

Then, there’s a heavy thump, the resounding echo of a body falling to the ground. The crackle in the air goes quiet. The Surgeon is dead.

Any luck they might have had with the Surgeon has dried up and

Sebastien is likely well on his way to finding the pike. They're running out of time and options. They still don't have a solution. They need more information.

Isaac is rifling through the pages of Mason's medical file, searching for something – *anything* – of note. He remembers what Melissa said, about it being just strange enough to mean something.

"What are you looking for?" Scott asks.

He's looking for that meaning. "Maybe there's something in here."

"Mason had a vanishing twin," Deaton says. Isaac already knew that and Stiles does too, but Liam and Scott wouldn't know yet. Isaac wasn't able to tell them before, not when Theo was still lingering.

(They don't know where Theo is anymore either. He got injured in the fight against the Beast and took off as soon as they turned their backs on him. Which is just so typical Isaac can't even find it in himself to be irritated or worried.)

"Now, we've got a vanishing Mason," Stiles quips. Isaac looks up from the file long enough to level him with dropped eyebrows and an unimpressed stare.

"What does that have to do with him turning into a two hundred and fifty year old French guy?" Liam asks, still in that frantic, borderline annoyed tone. "How does that even happen?"

"Hold on," Deaton says, tapping Liam's shoulder and gesturing over to, "Isaac might have something."

Isaac's pretty sure he looks just as surprised as the rest of them. Scott turns his way with bright eyes and a shimmer of excitement – adrenaline.

"Mason's twin wasn't entirely gone," Deaton says, leaning forward with eyes wide open and intensity in his words. "That's what made him a genetic chimera."

Isaac blinks.

Scott is the one that realizes the implication, that says, "The DNA was still there."

"Metaphorically speaking, the DNA of Mason could still be inside

Sebastien as well,” Deaton explains, still vague, but getting to the crux of his theory now.

“How?” Stiles asks.

“Life is... *energy*,” Deaton says, waving a cupped hand through the air. “Energy doesn’t just disappear.” Isaac can feel himself straightening up in anticipation, in bated breath, in hope. “The Dread Doctors may have found a way to break the rules of the supernatural world, but there are some rules that simply *won’t* break.”

Isaac tries not to think about Jackson and Matt and the kanima and, “*anything can break if enough pressure’s applied.*”

“So, Mason can’t just be gone?” Liam clarifies.

“Somewhere in Sebastien, he has to still exist in *some* form,” Deaton says, but Isaac is only half listening now. He’s watching Stiles pick up the empty Dread Doctor mask. “A spark of energy, a flicker of memory...”

“Hang on,” Stiles says, gaining their attention. He speaks quietly, a thought forming, “Liam, you said Mason said something right before he turned.”

“He said, ‘that’s not my name,’” Liam recites, staring mostly at his feet, but flicking his eyes up at the end.

“He finally remembered his name,” Scott says.

Stiles whispers, “*Damnatio memoriae.*”

“That’s what they wanted,” Liam says. He’s doing that thing he does, where he gets inappropriately excited when the pieces start sliding into place. He’s bounding with energy and life now, “They wanted Sebastien to remember his name.”

“Scott,” Isaac says. There’s an idea starting to take shape. Maybe they can steal the tactics of the Dread Doctors. Maybe they can reverse their plan. Maybe they just need Mason to remember too. Months of near constant research come together to create something that might actually help, to create, “You know the myth of what happens when you call a werewolf by its given name?”

Scott’s mouth clicks open, the softest parting of lips. Slowly, “He turns back to human.”

“What does that mean?” Liam asks. He’s still the most animated one in the room. He’s relentless in his need to *fix* this. “Someone can just walk up to the Beast, yell Mason’s name, and turn him back?”

“Not someone,” Deaton says, guiding the solution out of them, leading them towards—

“Lydia.”

Of course, it could never be that simple. Just as their hopes are starting to rise, they’re dashed again.

Once more, they end up back at the hospital with Lydia as the patient. It’s the third time since their senior year started two months ago. This time, she was attacked by Sebastien at the sheriff’s station. Her throat is clawed and her voice turned to a whisper.

Isaac sits in the waiting room with Liam, head in his hands and unable to see past the void of darkness.

Isaac should say something to Liam, but he doesn’t know how. He doesn’t know how to reassure him when the odds seem unbeatable. When it’s Mason that they’re losing. When Isaac hardly knows him, but knows enough to recognize that the Dread Doctors were right about one thing. They were right about Mason being purely good.

Isaac should say something, but he doesn’t know how when it’s Lydia that’s hurt. When she’s Plan A and they don’t have a backup.

Isaac doesn’t know how to be optimistic in a time like this. So, he sits in silence next to Liam and hopes his presence is enough of a comfort.

Eventually, Scott walks down the hallway, approaching the seated pair. His expression is dull and empty, but he gives Liam a weak smile when he looks up.

“Is she okay?” Liam asks.

“She’s gonna be fine,” Scott says, “*but* she can’t really talk.”

“It’s over, isn’t it?” Liam says. He sounds subdued and scared, less angry than he was at the clinic, more defeated.

Scott sighs, but doesn’t jump in with his usual pep talk or silver lining or relentless positivity.

Liam's lip quirks in the smallest, saddest smile. He exhales through his nose, a huff of breath and, "There's nothing we can do to save him."

Scott is quiet, enough so that Isaac knows he's fading. Isaac knows he's losing hope. Scott *never* loses hope.

Isaac pushes to his feet, looking down at Liam, "Hey, give us a second?"

Liam nods, but he doesn't meet Isaac's gaze.

Isaac snags Scott's wrist and guides him a little further down the hall, closer to Lydia's room and the direction Scott came from. Then, he stops and tips his head forward just a little, just to look Scott directly in the eye.

"Scott," is all he manages to say. He still doesn't know what he's doing. He's not the half-full person of the group. He's the half-empty-and-the-liquid-is-poison person.

"Isaac," Scott says back. He looks tired, but not annoyed or impatient. He just looks worn down and exhausted.

"There's gotta be something else we can do," Isaac says. Because he can't bear to see Scott like this. Because, "We have to try."

Scott shakes his head. "Lydia is the only way."

"Then we need to figure out how to help her," Isaac says. "We shift gears for a second. We stop thinking about Mason and the pike and everything else, and we – we focus on Lydia." He repeats, "There's gotta be something we can do."

Scott turns quiet again, but it's less empty and more considering now. He's thinking it over, he's trying to shift gears. He's trying to come up with something new. He's *trying*.

"If anyone's going to save Mason, it's you," Isaac says. "Your voice always works on me. Maybe – Maybe that's our backup plan."

Scott looks up at Isaac. His eyes are coming alive again. "What do you mean?"

"Like, we should still try to heal Lydia – even if it's only temporary, even if it's only enough for her to say one word – but we know in the back of our minds that... that, if she can't do it, then you'll try to

roar,” Isaac explains. He’s thinking a mile a minute now, “The Beast is still a werewolf. Maybe your alpha abilities would still work on him.”

Scott nods, but breaks the eye contact. Isaac can see the wheels turning in his mind. He can see a glimmer of hope and, “*Temporary...*” Scott echoes.

Then, Scott is turning back down the hall, marching towards Liam with purpose. Isaac follows without hesitation.

“Get up,” Scott says.

Liam straightens in his seat, but doesn’t move yet, simply asks, “Why?”

Scott’s expression flits into a slight smile. His hand is bouncing at his side and he sounds hopeful again, “Because I have an idea,” anticipation fills the air, “and because this isn’t over.”

Intense.

—

The idea takes them to Lydia’s hospital room. She’s got a bandage across her neck, white gauze flooded with red. She grunts and clenches her jaw tight against the pain as Scott and Isaac help her into a seated position.

The door cracks open and Melissa and Stiles return, the former saying, “Lydia, this is gonna have to be just between us since I can get fired for it.”

“It’s a cortisone shot,” Scott says, giving explanation to the idea that brought them here, the idea stolen from years of playing lacrosse with Jackson Whittemore and similar jocks. “It’s going to bring the inflammation down.”

Melissa uncaps the syringe, revealing a needle that must be at least two inches long.

Lydia brings her hand out from under the thin blanket of her hospital bed. She doesn’t look or smell nervous. She seems desensitized to it all. (Isaac tries not to think about that, about what it means of Lydia, of her time at Eichen House.)

“Not there,” Melissa says.

Then, she maneuvers Isaac out of the way and peels the bandage from Lydia's neck, revealing the jagged red scratch. Lydia winces with the pull, whimpering quietly.

"Oh, yeah, okay, I'm gonna need to leave," Stiles rambles, a quiet tint of panic in his voice. Isaac's pretty sure it's got less to do with the blood and more to do with the sight of Lydia in pain.

"You're not going anywhere," Melissa says as she continues prepping. "Hold her hand."

Stiles hesitates, looking like he's going to falter back a step, so Isaac grabs his arm and yanks him closer to the bed. Stiles trips a little and glares angrily, but rights himself and says, "Okay, fine. I'm not leaving, but I still might faint."

For all his complaints, Stiles takes Lydia's hand and looks at her with more tenderness than Isaac can handle.

"Okay," Melissa says softly. She positions the needle in the air, poised over the scratch, and, "Here we go."

Liam faints.

Scott drops his hold on Lydia, running to Liam's unconscious side. Isaac lets him go, taking up his place at the edge of Lydia's hospital bed. He doesn't interlace their fingers like Stiles does, but he places his palm over the back of her hand.

"Okay, Lydia, this is gonna hurt like a bitch."

Melissa presses down on the plunger. There's a squeaking noise at the back of Lydia's throat, then her mouth drops open and the sound transforms into something strained and forced. There's very little volume in the exclamation of discomfort, but there's a mountain of pain there.

Isaac draws it up through her skin.

—

The five of them scramble out of the elevator with Lydia propped up between Scott and Stiles. She looks out of it, but she's mostly steady on her feet.

"Okay. I'll get Malia. Text me when you find Parrish," Stiles orders,

immediately breaking away from the group and rushing toward the exit. As he lets go, Isaac edges a little closer to Lydia, worried that she's going to collapse without Stiles' presence. (She doesn't, but he stays nearby anyway.)

"Hold on," Scott calls, bringing Stiles to a stop as he digs around in his jacket pocket. He pulls out an indiscernible object wrapped in brown paper.

"What is this?" Stiles asks, exasperated and confused even as he takes the proffered item.

"Something I've been working on for a while," Scott answers vaguely. "Just – Make sure Malia gets it."

"Okay," Stiles stretches, still unsure, "is it a Plan B?"

"It was Plan A."

Stiles jerks his head to one side, eyes narrowing, "Plan A never works."

"This one will," Scott says, determined and confident.

Stiles doesn't stick around to reinforce his disbelief. Instead, he says a quick, "Okay," and takes off running towards the exit. His red shirt disappears out the doors and Isaac can only pray to every greater force that Scott is right. Derek is with Malia. Plan A *has* to work.

—

Together, they race to the tunnels. Because *of course* that's where this is going to end.

They're running down dimly lit paths, journey accompanied only by the sounds of their heavy breathing and the splashing of their footsteps.

That is, until Isaac hears a crackle.

"Scott," Isaac breathes as they turn a corner. The alpha, leading the group, pauses before a grate in the floor. "Did you hear that?"

"I heard that," Lydia whispers.

"Lydia, save your voice," Scott says, but Isaac isn't listening.

He's listening to the telltale hiss, crack, sizzle of electricity. He's looking down at the puddle wet ground. It's all too familiar.

"Lydia, get out of the water!" he warns.

Isaac doesn't think, just uses both hands to push her back. He doesn't hold back his strength, he needs to get her out of the water. The electricity would kill her and she's their only hope at saving Mason.

Lydia stumbles out of the puddle just in time.

All at once, the electricity slams into Isaac. He tries to fight it, tries to power through, but he can't. He loses control of his muscles, they spasm and tighten. He can't move, he can't fight it, he can't control it.

He tips forward, falling to the ground with screams of pain, right alongside Scott and Liam.

"Sorry, Lydia," Theo's voice echoes through the dark tunnels, crooning and evil.

Isaac sees Lydia falling backward, hears muted noises of fear. He sees Scott scrambling toward the now open grate, hears him grunting to grab her.

And Isaac can't move. He's not as strong as Scott and it's all too familiar. It's Boyd's plan and the hospital parking lot. It's the weakness that Isaac has never been able to shake.

The electricity is still toying at his skin, a low thrum of energy. And it hurts. It hurts so much. The pain is an all consuming thing. He expects everything around him to fall away. He expects no sounds, no sight, no smells. He expects to narrow into nothing but pain.

But he doesn't.

There's still sound. He still hears Lydia's jolted cries and scrapes of terror. He still hears Scott panting and groaning with the effort. He still hears Theo's claws sinking into Scott's skin.

There's still sight. He still sees Scott plastered to the ground, arm hanging over the edge. He still sees Theo stalking towards him, slamming his hand into the center of Scott's back, pinning him down and keeping him still. He still sees Theo strike.

There's still smell. He still smells electricity, burning plastic and damp

stone. He still smells fear, tangy and a little bit like sweat. He still smells the first spray of blood, metallic and drying.

“Feel that, Scott?” Theo bites. Scott gasps. “Kanima venom. Just let it happen, let it go.”

Lydia shouts, like she’s trying to hold it in, but her body isn’t listening. Like the fear is too much for her to take.

“Let everything go,” Theo drawls.

Isaac and Liam are trying to inch forward, trying to get to Scott and Lydia, but the current is still forcing its way through their bodies. They still don’t have control.

“No, no!” Scott panics, shouts. He’s trying to fight against the venom, but he doesn’t have a choice.

His grip goes slack and Lydia falls with a piercing scream. It ricochets in the narrow line of tunnels, filling the air and spreading like a wildfire, calling to every creature underground.

Only one responds. The Beast growls and roars, answering her wail with a rumbling, resonating bass. It vibrates through the ground, pulsing under Isaac’s chest.

“You hear that?” Theo asks. He looks over his shoulder, arrogant and smug, “*That’s* the sound of real power.”

He shifts, gold eyes glowing, and disappears around the corner.

—

As soon as Theo is out of sight, Isaac and Liam break free of the electric shock. They help each other to get steady, pushing to their feet, but Isaac is just as quickly on the ground again. This time, he’s kneeling at Scott’s limp side, purposeful and attentive.

The claw marks in Scott’s shoulder are gouged in deep and mean, a paralytic that’s meant to last.

Isaac has his hands on Scott, trying to assist him in the movement, but Scott grunts, “I can’t move.”

He’s stating the obvious, each word coming out ragged and rough, like it’s a battle to spit the sentence.

“Fight it,” Isaac says, fierce and unwavering. And, “He’s not a real kanima. He’s not a real werewolf. He’s *barely* even human.” Then, “You’re stronger than this. You’re stronger than him. You’re a *true* alpha.”

Footsteps approach.

There’s a brief moment where Liam’s claws are out and a growl is bubbling in Isaac’s chest, but then Deucalion comes into view, and he’s saying, “Your beta is right, Scott. We need to move.”

Your beta, echoes around in Isaac’s head, but he ignores it. He solidifies and strengthens, says again, “Scott. Fight it.”

And he does.

Scott’s eyes glow ruby-red. There’s sweat beading off his forehead, but his arms are twitching and his muscles are flexing. Isaac’s hands are a support on his shoulder and waist, but Scott doesn’t need him.

Scott presses to his feet.

—

They follow the sound of Theo’s petulant complaints. They enter his tunnel, Deucalion leading the charge with Scott, Isaac, and Liam close behind. (Liam, for his part, seems to be clued into the Deucalion plan – Isaac figures Scott must have told him before they went to meet with Theo yesterday.)

Theo is squirming on the ground, taking in the sight of the four of them, working together and moving as a unit. He bites, “You lied to me.”

Isaac just barely manages to hold back his scoff.

“You and Scott...” Theo winces, looking between Deucalion and the rest.

Deucalion kneels down in front of him. He’s a picture of calm, something dangerous lurking beneath the surface. This man used to terrify Isaac, but, now, he feels smug at having him on their side. Now, rather than cowering under it, Isaac feeds off his domineering presence.

“That’s right, Theo.” Deucalion takes off his sunglasses. “The whole

time.”

He closes his eyes. And, when they open, the scarred red fades and heals to an average blue-gray color. He reveals healthy eyes and the lie of his blindness returning.

Theo clenches his jaw, squared off and breathing heavily through his nose. He’s trying to appear unaffected, he’s trying to look like he isn’t devastated, but he’s failing.

Isaac hears the mechanical voice of the Dread Doctors in the back of his mind, the droning of, “*Theo Raeken... Failure.*”

Isaac revels in the truth of the statement.

“It would’ve never worked,” Theo says. Isaac can’t tell if he’s asking a question, or trying to brush it aside, like Deucalion’s betrayal doesn’t matter because his fate was already sealed.

“It *could’ve* worked,” Deucalion counters with that same even tone. It must be infuriating for Theo to hear him so nonchalant, so casual about the destruction of his dreams. “With Belasko’s talons.”

Isaac tries to bury the sick twist of pleasure in watching the realization form in Theo’s eyes, the recognition that he’s been played and outsmarted, that they beat him at his own game.

Then, with the precision of a man who once called himself Death, Destroyer of Worlds, Deucalion snaps Theo’s neck. He falls to the ground, incapacitated and paralyzed, but not dead.

“You broke my neck,” Theo shudders and shakes, panting the words through gritted teeth.

Deucalion moves to his feet. He sneers down at Theo, giving the first show of emotion through the entire exchange, “And good luck with that.”

“There’s an access grate that leads to the sub-level,” Deucalion says, speaking now to Scott, Isaac, and Liam. “I think we can get to Lydia there.”

“What about Mason?” Liam asks.

Deucalion looks at him. There’s a flicker of reassurance in his gaze. It’s a strange sight – a once horrible adversary providing comfort to their

youngest beta. "We can still save your friend."

"Let's go," Scott urges.

They turn to leave, making it only two steps forward before the gunshot sounds. It's harsh and loud through the quiet space, but worse is the grunt from Deucalion. The scent of blood reaches Isaac's nose, and then he's looking over his shoulder and Deucalion is sliding down the wall. He hisses, "This just isn't my day."

"This is a surprising alliance, *Scott*," Gerard shouts and bellows, entering the tunnel with his gun held out. "You and Deucalion?" His voice is gritty with age and grating at Isaac's nerves. "How long have you been planning this *clever* little double cross?"

His gun is pointed right towards Scott and Isaac's heart is pounding. He's assessing the distance, trying to figure out if he can attack Gerard before he can shoot. Or, even, if he can jump in front of the barrel before the bullet reaches Scott's skin.

But then, Argent takes a step forward, and, "About as long as he and I have been planning this one."

Argent tosses the pike to Scott who catches it easily. Isaac can't find it in himself to be hurt or betrayed by the secret. All he feels is a cold flush of relief, of pride, of *impressed*.

"What are you doing?" Gerard asks, some of the bravado drips out of his voice, something more insecure taking over.

"I knew when I brought you back it would never be about saving lives," Argent says, but he's looking at Scott the entire time. He doesn't spare Gerard a single glance, not until, "Only about immortalizing your own."

The father and son pull their guns at the same time. Gerard's muzzle meets Argent's and they find themselves in a standoff.

"Scott, go," Argent says. His voice is gruff and serious.

They hesitate. Isaac and Liam look to Scott, unsure how to proceed, unsure what the plan is here. Argent may have a weapon, but he's still vulnerable to his father's attacks. He could still get hurt if they leave him, but it must be a risk Argent is ready to take because, again, he shouts, "Go, now!"

And so, pike in hand and one step closer to victory, they go.

—

There's a momentary pause where Isaac and Scott just look at each other, but then Liam is urging them on and the tension breaks. They part ways – Isaac headed towards the access grate and Scott and Liam going after the Beast. As he splits off on his own, Isaac tries not to feel terrified. He tries not to feel like a piece of him is missing.

As he enters the lower level, Isaac catches a familiar scent.

Corey.

Isaac looks around frantically, but, of course, he can't see anything. The scent disappears just as quickly as it comes, fading into chemicals and blood and people. Isaac can't stop for the fleeting hint of life. He doesn't have time. He has to get to Lydia. He can only hope that Corey is okay – that he's safe.

Isaac doesn't know what he's searching for. The tunnels are a branching and twisting map of plain gray walls. Everything is identical and the same. They've searched these tunnels time and time again. He could be down here for hours before they find Lydia.

He doesn't have hours. He has minutes at best.

Isaac doesn't know where to start, so he just runs. He runs around corners and past lines of pipes. He runs until his heart is pounding and his breath is shallow. He runs until he feels lost. He runs until he hears it.

Pounding. Pounding like fists against metal. Rattling. Rattling like metal against metal.

Isaac follows the sound. He tunes in and internally pleads with Lydia to keep fighting, to not give up. He just needs her to keep trying, just for a few more seconds, just to get him to her.

Isaac runs as fast as his legs will carry him, sprinting as the sound grows and the scent joins. It's Lydia's scent, a faint and nearly gone perfume, panic, and something uniquely her. Something that reminds Isaac of playground swings and the feeling of flying.

Isaac soars through the tunnels, exhilarated and heroic and fearless.

He runs until the door comes into view, until the pounding and the scent are both right there, until he can hear Lydia's rabbiting heartbeat. He leaps to the ground, to a skidding halt and an anchored breath.

It's a sliding door.

Isaac smirks. Theo thinks he knows them so well, thinks he's *so* clever. But, little does he know, Isaac is well acquainted with a door like this. Little does he know, Isaac and Derek had to install a special locking system to keep the loft secure. All because of a sliding door like this. All because they're useless against werewolf strength.

Isaac fits his claws under the lip of the door, plants his feet, and *yanks*. Isaac bites down with fanged teeth as he pulls with every fiber of his being. The metal scrapes and burns against the stone of the tunnels. Sparks bead from the top of the door, but a crack is opening up and growing bigger. And, and, and—

The door gives.

Lydia stands at the center of the room. Her chest rises and falls with labored breaths, eyes darting between Isaac and the scratched metal door and his bloodied claws.

“Isaac?”

Lydia's voice is weak and shocked, a barren whisper to save up for what's to come.

“There it is again.” Isaac's smirk intensifies. “Always the tone of surprise.”

—

Isaac can hear Scott struggling for breath, he can hear the beat of his heart turning weak and delicate and uncertain.

“Hurry,” Isaac pleads to Lydia. He gets a hand on her arm, helping hoist her up through the access grate, scrambling into the upper-level.

Lydia is clearly tired, as they all are, but they're so close to victory. Isaac can *taste* it. They need to hurry. They're so close. They just have to get to Scott, they just have to save him and save Mason.

They're so close.

They push through the heavy weight of fatigue, the fog of exhaustion in their minds, the vertigo of dwindling adrenaline. They push past it all because they know how close they are. They know this is it. This is the last leg of the race, the home stretch, the final shove.

Lydia's feet scuff the ground and her shoulders are bowing, but she doesn't slow down and she doesn't give up. Isaac keeps contact, practically holding her hand, as they sprint towards the end.

They turn the corner and the finish line comes into view. Scott is on the ground and panting for breath, but his eyes are red and his heart is beating. Sebastien is towering over him, readying for his next strike, but then...

"Mason."

Lydia's voice is fully human, fully normal, fully not enough.

Sebastien rounds on Lydia and Isaac. He starts charging towards them, quick strides and a steady pace, but Isaac doesn't leave Lydia's side and she doesn't cower.

"I think you're gonna need to try it a little louder," Isaac urges, desperate and scared, but still not fleeing.

Right in front of them, Sebastien begins to transform. It starts in his eyes, a purple glow and a sinister stare. Then, he's enveloped in darkness. He retreats into the shadows. Smoke swirls and contorts, mimicking the shape of something real. The shape of a monster with huge teeth and huge claws and death as its only desire.

Lydia inhales, sucking in air and pulling back, and then...

"**MASON!**"

Same as Sebastien, her voice transforms. It's not her usual shrieking wail, it's deep and low and grounded in her chest. It carries through the atmosphere, wave after wave of reverberating decibel. The sound floods the tunnels, acoustic space directing it forward and forward and forward.

Her shout *slams* into the Beast. She's tapped into her potential, she's a raging storm, she's unleashed. She pins him in place, she keeps him still, she's a pressurized force of nature.

Plan A works. Lydia sublimates the Beast. He explodes in a billow of

black smoke.

For a moment, they're in limbo. For a moment, it's just the dwindling dregs of Lydia's scream and the cloud of darkness.

Then, there's a figure coming out of the smoke. A sneaker hits the ground and Mason is falling, running, stumbling. Forward and forward and forward.

Into Corey's arms.

He peels off the wall of the tunnel, appearing to catch Mason. And he's grabbing him tight. He's pulling him close. He's gasping and grappling and holding on. They're falling into each other and Mason is standing there and everything's okay and.

And the non-solid form of the Beast is shrieking through the air. Its eyes are glowing and it's turning the corner and trying to escape and.

And Parrish gets a grip on intangible smoke. Parrish is up in flames and containing the Beast and shouting for, "Scott!"

Scott is springing into action. He grabs the pike and turns and aims. He pulls back and launches it forward and forward and forward and.

And the pike collides with the smokey Beast and pierces through and there's an eruption of blue light and.

And the Beast fades to nothing. It disappears and it dies and.

And everyone is panting for breath, exhaling for relief, and, "Is everyone okay?"

"Not everyone," Theo's voice booms through the tunnels. Lightning dances in the air around him, it encases him like a shield of force and power. He's stomping ahead and staring right at Scott. He's angry and alive and vengeful. He sends an electric bolt forward and forward and forward. It's barreling towards Scott and.

And Kira leaps into the lightning's path. She appears out of nowhere, materializing almost as Corey had. She swings her sword through the air and steps into the blast and catches it. The spark connects with her blade and Kira holds it steady. Her eyes shine with orange and she says, "The skinwalkers have a message for you, Theo."

The electricity stops crackling, but the air stays taut and thick with

tension. Theo's eyes go scared and Kira's sword is shining with an indigo glow and.

And, "Your sister wants to see you."

Kira slams her sword into the ground. She pierces the stone and it cracks and runs jagged lines toward Theo. The floor crumbles and quakes and opens up with a crooked, broken, lightning shape. A hole forms where Theo stands and a hand reaches out and.

And Theo's sister crawls out. She grabs Theo's ankle and tugs him down. Theo scrambles to find purchase, blunt nails sliding on smooth floor, and, "Scott, help me! No, no! Scott! Help me, Scott! No! Scott! Help me!"

His voice breaks as he falls below and.

And the ground closes over.

—

A lot happens in the aftermath.

Deucalion lives through the bullet wounds in his stomach. They thank him profusely, but he wants nothing in return for his allegiance. All he asks for is peace and quiet, so they let him go and they don't ask where he's headed.

Argent shot Gerard in the arm. Not enough to kill him (unfortunately), but enough to keep him out of Scott's way. Though, that's a story they have to hear from Deucalion. By the time Isaac and Scott return to the location of the double crosses, both Argent men are gone. But Isaac isn't worried. He trusts Argent to take care of his father, whatever that entails.

Derek, Stiles, Malia, and Braeden all manage to survive the night. Turns out, this Plan A worked too. Scott's mystery item was Belasko's talons. Malia used them to take her mother's powers. Scott saved Malia from having to kill The Desert Wolf and saved the others from being killed by The Desert Wolf.

Hayden was attacked by Sebastien. She's too hurt to heal fully, even as a chimera. This time, Scott doesn't hesitate to offer her the bite. And she doesn't hesitate to accept.

The worst is what happens to Kira. Or, really, it doesn't happen *to* her.

It's more... what she chooses. The fox inside is too volatile and unpredictable. Kira chooses to leave. She gives her sword to her mother and returns to the desert to work with the skinwalkers.

Isaac expects her abandonment to hurt more than it does. Maybe it's the fact that he and Kira were never that close, or maybe it's the healing he's managed to do. Even with the chaos around them, Isaac has come out the other side stronger than ever before.

At the start of the school year, Isaac was terrified of losing his pack, his people, his family. He was terrified of being left behind and alone again. But, now, he's not sure that's a possibility anymore. Now, he thinks they'll always find each other again.

Even Allison.

Scott cried when he told Isaac what happened. In the final fight, Sebastien got his claws into his neck. Scott says he doesn't think Sebastien even knew what he was doing, but he tapped into Scott's memories. He saw Allison and he *recognized* her. He hesitated. Long enough for Scott to break free, long enough for Isaac to get to Lydia, long enough for her to scream.

Allison saved his life.

—

In the library, Isaac sits at a table with Stiles and Lydia. He looks up at the second level, looking for Scott.

He finds him with his back hunched over. He's examining a particular shelf, and Isaac knows what he's seeing. Their names – signed and stamped and immortalized in permanent marker. Their pack as a forever memory.

Scott turns and peers over the banister. He looks down at the second level, looking for Isaac.

He finds him already staring back.

Their eyes lock, and Isaac knows what Scott has just seen. His addition to the shelf – **E.R.** and **V.B.**

But Isaac isn't embarrassed to be caught, in the staring or the signing. He just lets blue eyes meet brown, lets Scott see him as no one else has before.

Because, yeah, a lot happens in the aftermath, but not much changes.

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap on season 5B!

Memory Lost

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 1

Word count: 6,890

Chapter Notes

I accidentally posted this for like three hours last week oops (also sorry I don't think this chapter is my best writing)

Blue and red flash through the night air of the parking lot, filling the atmosphere with a colorful glow. Sirens beck and call and cry in the space. Claw marks embed in the hood of a car. A radiator hisses with smokey air. An EMT wraps Stiles' wrist in a fabric cast.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"What in the hell," Sheriff Stilinski's voice looms behind them, "were you three thinking?"

The boys each turn around quickly, facing the Sheriff with sheepish exteriors. Or, at least, that's how Isaac's feeling. He always gets a little nervous edge around Stilinski and their obvious mistakes here don't help in the slightest.

Beside him, Scott simply shrugs, smiling a little, "We were just trying to help."

"Why don't you try and *help* me understand," Stilinski's arms cross over his chest and his shoulders creep up towards his ears, voice turning to a harsh whisper, "what the hell happened here?"

"Right, well," Stiles starts, way too calm for someone who just inadvertently caused a car wreck, "we were trying to gently persuade him to pull over..."

Isaac flashes back to Scott's glowing red eyes, shifted features, and snarling growl. *Yeah... Gently.*

Stilinski looks at them with impatience and disbelief. He shows no amount of leniency or understanding, as if Stiles' explanation means nothing to him. He just keeps watching them, going a little red and

eyebrows pulling together. Isaac fidgets uncomfortably.

“He was getting away,” Scott tries, face squinted up like he knows it’s a long shot.

“He *got* away,” Stilinski corrects.

Scott slumps, but Stiles doesn’t give in. He continues his tirade, volume steadily rising and body pivoting as Stilinski starts to walk away, “Right because he’s obviously some sort of criminal *mastermind*, Dad!”

“Uh huh,” the sheriff says, leading them around to the back of the transport van. “Do you want to guess what the stolen merchandise is?”

Stilinski opens the trunk of the van, revealing multiple nondescript metal containers. Isaac has no idea what they are, but, based on the smug expression of Stilinski, he’d wager it’s nothing significant. Even still, Stiles doesn’t have it in him to back down from the obvious challenge.

“Critical life-saving medical equipment?”

“No.”

“Poison gas?”

“Nope.”

“Filled with drugs?”

Stilinski leans forward and over enunciates, “Helium.”

“H-Helium?” Stiles stutters and stumbles on his echo, drawn out in his confusion.

Helium. Like, for birthday balloons. Scott just exposed himself as a werewolf for... helium.

—

They drive away from the crime scene – the one they had a hand in causing – in almost complete silence. The Jeep is stifled with tension, a mixture of embarrassment and bewilderment.

But the quiet isn’t like it was in the fall. This time, it’s a shared discomfort. It doesn’t come from a strain in their connections. If

anything, they feel closer now, more stable, more linked. The thought eases some of Isaac's inner turmoil.

"This could be a good thing," Scott says, when the silence gets too heavy.

Stiles, from the passenger seat, looks over at Scott. His expression is warped in doubt, "That we saved helium?"

Scott chuckles. It's a bright but soft sound, almost delicate. (Isaac's heart does stupid things in his chest.) "I mean, that..." Scott explains, "they don't need us anymore."

Stiles scoffs, "Yeah, well, they *need* us. They just don't *know* it."

It's been almost six months of calm, an unprecedented era of peace and quiet. Isaac's not sure if he trusts it to last. He knows Stiles doesn't, knows he's waiting with bated breath for the chaos to return. Isaac is less anxious about it, more dragging his feet and turning the other cheek. Stiles would say he's in denial. Isaac would say he's living in the moment.

"We're all going off to college soon," Scott says, an easy reminder. "So, Beacon Hills is going to have to survive without us."

They haven't heard back from UC Davis yet, but Scott's being his usual relentlessly optimistic self. He's acting as if they've both already been accepted, even going so far as to suggest them living together in the fall. Isaac thinks he'd make it one month in a dorm room with Scott before his heart gave out for good.

"Beacon Hills will burn to the ground without us," Stiles says. His voice is hushed and casual, but his conviction is clear.

"Stiles," Scott shakes his head, "they don't need us."

Isaac would really like for that to be true, but as it stands...

Stiles' phone starts buzzing in his jacket pocket. He scrambles to find it, pulling out a flashing contact name of **Dad** and shouting a triumphant, "They need us!"

—

There's a kid at the station. Liam and Hayden are the ones that found him, in an abandoned car on the road back from the preserve. The kid

is young – maybe nine or ten – and his parents are missing. Both of them.

Isaac aches with it.

“Alex, you know we’re having trouble locating your parents,” Stilinski’s whisper carries to the hallway where Isaac, Scott, and Stiles are waiting just outside his office door. “And since you can’t remember anything, we have a method – an *unusual* method that might help you remember. But I need you to be okay with it. I also need you to know that it’s probably going to hurt.”

Scott’s looking at Isaac. His eyes are sad, sympathetic, apologetic. Isaac tries to be reassuring in his returning gaze, a slight uptick of his lips. He’s not sure if it works, but Scott does mirror the meager smile.

“I don’t care,” Alex says. “I just want to find my mom and dad.”

And so, Stilinski calls them to join him in his office. He closes the blinds of the room, providing shelter from curious eyes. Isaac and Stiles stand side by side, watching as Scott kneels down in front of Alex. Scott pats a hand on his shoulder, quietly and casually comforting, like it’s the easiest thing in the world for him. And, knowing Scott, it probably is.

“You ready?” Scott asks.

Alex gives a small, but determined nod.

Scott draws his hand up from Alex’s shoulder. Isaac hears the slick click of claws sliding into place, followed by the piercing of nails hitting skin. Alex’s body seizes up and his back arches like a bow. His eyes flutter and close.

And then, they wait.

—

They wait until Scott resurfaces. He comes to with a gasp, shooting up to his feet and stumbling back and back. He stumbles into Isaac, who reaches out a steadying hand, catching on Scott’s waist and staying there for longer than warranted.

“What’d you see?” Stiles asks.

Isaac doesn’t miss the way Stiles’ eyes flick down to his hand. Isaac

quickly retreats.

“I saw a guy,” Scott says, “on a horse.”

“A horse?” Stiles repeats, almost as incredulous about this as he was about the helium.

“He had a gun,” Scott adds. He’s a little breathless, eyes gone wild. Isaac yearns to reach out and touch him again, to offer comfort and support. But he doesn’t, of course. He keeps his hands firmly rooted at his sides, curled into fists just an edge too tight.

“Okay,” Stilinski says. “A guy with a gun? That sounds like my department, not yours.”

“What about his parents? What happened to them?” Isaac redirects, looking between Scott and the kid. He doesn’t want to stop here, doesn’t want to leave him orphaned and alone.

“I don’t know. T-That’s all I remember, but,” Scott pauses. He inhales sharply, head moving in a stiff shake. “I got this feeling.”

Scott’s heart rate stutters and spikes just a little. He’s looking at the floor, pointedly avoiding eye contact with anyone in the room. His concern is palpable and sharp, a noose around Isaac’s throat, a poison in the air.

“What kind of feeling?”

“They’re coming back,” Alex speaks up, drawing their attention. He raises his head, looks them in the eye, and says, “They’re coming for me.”

—

At the impound lot, the car window is shattered through and tinted vaguely green, but nothing about it registers as an abnormality. At least, nothing that Isaac or the others can discern. That’s why Lydia is here.

Lydia’s voice carries through the broken windshield as she sits behind the wheel, twisting her fingers against it, “I’m not getting anything.”

Stiles starts to respond, but his voice is drowned out from the backseat, covered by a howl. Or, actually, two of them. A wolf and a coyote, both with blue eyes, come trotting out of the darkness and

into the lot.

And, in a dramatic entrance so typical of the Hales, they both transform. Isaac wishes they would care just a little bit more about modesty. He chucks a set of clothes at Derek, unbothered by the way the t-shirt hits him in the face.

"I don't think they're dead," Lydia says as she much more gently gives Malia her own clothes.

"They're dead," Malia disagrees, shrugging. She's brusque about it, showing no signs of sympathy with, "Probably torn apart. The only thing I don't get is why there's no blood."

"They're not dead," Lydia repeats, stern in her belief. "If they were dead, I'd sense it."

"If they were alive, we'd smell it," Derek counters, but his voice is gentle, making up for the softness Malia lacks.

"Yeah, I'm not getting anything either," Scott says.

And that sets off alarm bells in Isaac. He can't smell anything, not with the amount of cars in the lot and the mixing scent of the pack, but as Stiles states, "Scott, what are you talking about? You were in his head for four minutes – I timed it."

Scott should have gotten some indicator from searching Alex's memories. He should have gotten some familiarity with his parents, enough to find their scents among the crowd.

"Well, it's not an exact science," Scott says. He looks tired, like he's at a loss. "And he's a kid. Maybe he's too freaked out to remember."

Isaac tries not to think about his own freaked out and buried childhood memories.

"Why does it matter if they're dead?" Malia asks. "Dead is dead."

Because if they're dead, then this kid just lost his entire family. But nobody says that. Not to Malia, who knows that reality just as well as Isaac and Derek do.

"Okay," Stiles says, sounding a little impatient. He shifts the topic slightly to the left, saying, "If it's just a robbery, we can't help them. And if it's something supernatural, my dad can't help them."

“It sounds like you *want* it to be supernatural,” Lydia says. Her tone of voice doesn’t give much away. It doesn’t convey her feelings on the matter, it’s just an ostensibly casual observation.

It brings all eyes to Stiles.

“It’s been like six months since anything’s happened,” Stiles says, as if that’s explanation enough, like they should all know better than to get comfortable.

He probably has a point. The last time they got placated by peace, Theo showed up and the Dread Doctors followed shortly after. That hadn’t ended well for any one of them.

“Yeah, and once a week you drag me out of bed like I’m some sort of supernatural metal detector,” Lydia bites.

(Isaac’s fairly certain her indignation is at least a little bit of a front. Isaac has heard more than one story from Stiles about late night excursions turning to early morning diner breakfasts.)

“Okay, it is *way* more often than that,” Stiles corrects, fixating on the wrong detail. “Y-You can’t tell me that you think this is just some series of *impossible* coincidences?”

He’s getting a little worked up now. Isaac doesn’t like how similar this feels to Theo and the criminal tremor and every other scary intuition Stiles has ever had. He doesn’t like this feeling, of a line in the sand, of Stiles on one side of it and the rest on the other.

“What I’m *saying*,” Lydia retorts, “is that *maybe* that wouldn’t be so bad.”

Without much ceremony, she turns to leave, heels clicking dully against the pavement. Malia follows quickly after her, but does have the decency to peek over her shoulder at Stiles, maybe feeling a little sorry for him.

Stiles trails a couple steps behind the girls, but he doesn’t go with them. He slides a hand over his jaw, disgruntled and exasperated. He watches them depart with the distinctive scent of disappointment clouding around him.

Then, he looks back at Scott and Isaac, more than a little imploring.

Scott is the first to react, holding out his arms and shrugging in a

gesture of, *well*.

Isaac wants to stay completely still, wants to give no answer, but the tilt of his jaw comes as naturally as breathing. It's a nod of his head towards Scott, a concession to his ease of letting it go.

Stiles heaves a world weary sigh, dramatic and borderline heartbroken. Isaac narrowly avoids rolling his eyes, mostly because Stiles goes so far as to look for support in *Derek* and he doesn't want to miss the reaction. Though, as expected, Derek is a blank wall of indifference. He stays neutral, giving no signs of leaning one way or the other.

Stiles walks away, getting back in the car and all but slamming the door shut behind him.

He leaves the other three in a stunted sort of quiet, unsure how to proceed forward. Isaac looks at Scott for guidance, but, shockingly, Scott seems to be looking at him the same way. Then, he splays his hand out, towards the car, like, *lead the way*.

Isaac hesitates, but does as silently instructed. He approaches the driver's side of the car, leaning down a little to peer at Stiles through the open window. A little snarky, he says, "You're staring at a broken windshield."

Stiles sighs again. His eyes flit up to Isaac (and Scott, who's come up close behind him). "There's something wrong with it."

"It's broken," Scott observes astutely. Isaac really shouldn't be so amused by something so simply stupid. "And it wasn't a magic bullet," Scott adds, reaching around Isaac, pressing into his space, to put a hand on Stiles' shoulder. "It was a regular bullet. That blew out a regular windshield."

Scott looks around the impound lot. "Just like that one," he points to a car. The windshield is marked with a bullet shaped impact, but the glass is still mostly intact, just fractured and split. "And that one," Scott gestures to another. Again, the glass is splintered, but not blown out. His next pointed finger comes with a mumbled, under his breath, "That one..."

As the four of them look around the parking lot, they quickly come to a conclusion. This car is the only one with the windshield shattered through. This car is the only one with open air whistling by. This car is the only one with a green tint and large shards of glass broken and

torn.

Stiles picks up a sliver of broken windshield. He whispers, "Magic bullet."

Derek drove himself to the impound lot, parked his car a block away, and then made his grand, dramatic, wolfy entrance. Isaac hates him for it just a little bit, but he does appreciate being given a ride home, so he keeps his criticism to himself.

The loft is quiet and dark and Isaac would be content going straight to bed, but he doesn't. He stops long enough to give Derek the full debrief, the details that got left out of the text summoning him to the lot.

Derek listens and nods along, and, at the end, he says, "You know, you don't owe Stiles belief. Just because of what happened with Theo, you... we..."

Derek doesn't seem to be able to finish his sentence, but Isaac doesn't need him to, he understands the message there. He shakes his head, and, "No. I – I know." He runs a hand through his hair, shaking out the curls a little. "I know I don't have to listen to him just because we didn't last time. But. You have to admit: it is a little weird, isn't it?"

Derek shrugs, "I think it's pretty easy to see what you want to see." And, "Confirmation bias, and all that."

Isaac supposes that's true. Any irregularity could be assumed as evidence of supernatural meddling given the right perspective, the right outlook, the right angle. But that doesn't mean there are really magic bullets.

Isaac finds some comfort in the thought. He doesn't want to actively root against Stiles, but he doesn't want him to be right either. He just wants to get through the last two months of high school. He just wants to graduate.

He doesn't just want to survive anymore, is the thing. He wants to be happy. He wants the peace and the quiet. He wants to not be afraid anymore. He wants to *live*.

Isaac watches with muted amusement as Stiles repeatedly jumps into Malia's yearbook photo. Isaac's not entirely sure what his goal is, probably to get a less forced, more genuine smile out of her. It definitely doesn't work.

"You ruined it," Malia complains as she marches over to join the others at their lunch table. She stomps away as if Stiles has done this on purpose. Which, maybe he has, but Isaac's pretty sure his intentions weren't so sinister.

Stiles follows after her, asking, "Why would I want to ruin your yearbook photo?"

"Maybe because you haven't signed up for your own photo yet?" Malia suggests, taking a seat on the surface of the table rather than the perfectly good bench.

"Yes, I did," Stiles says, victoriously pulling out a form.

"It's blank!" Malia says, exasperated as ever.

Stiles looks down at the form, mouth twisting, and, "Uh."

Scott finally looks up from where he's been focusedly scribbling in a notebook to Isaac's left, saying, "Or maybe you're sublimating the stress of graduating by avoiding key milestones."

For a moment, they all just stare at Scott blankly.

Then, "Psych paper?" Isaac asks.

Scott looks over at Isaac, gives a slight smile and confirms, "Psych paper."

A chorus of understanding and, "ohh," spreads from the group.

Isaac jostles his shoulder against Scott's. Just because he can. It earns him a grumpy pout as Scott's pencil drags against the page in a jagged line. Isaac meets the expression with a slight smile and a shrug. Scott softens.

Stiles, trying to get their attention, gesticulates wildly, "Hey, so, the deputies searched the car. No slugs, no exit hole. And the address Alex gave my dad? It's an abandoned house."

Stiles tilts his voice up like he's selling them something, but no one's really buying. They greet him with mild confusion and maybe a touch

of concern.

“Come on!” Stiles cajoles, bouncing on his heels. “Missing parents, suspicious guy on horseback, magic bullet. Who’s coming with?”

“I’ve gotta retake my photos,” Malia says, gesturing towards the line of students.

“Yeah,” Lydia winces, neck muscles straining with the expressive movement, “not interested.”

Stiles pivots more towards the right, looking at Scott and Isaac. He looks a little pleading and pathetic, but Isaac isn’t letting himself be manipulated. Not that easily and not that quickly, so, “Derek said he would ground me if I skipped class.”

(It’s not a total lie. Derek technically *did* say that. As a joke. Two weeks ago. But what Stiles doesn’t know won’t hurt him.)

Stiles groans, turning his full focus and his final hopes onto Scott.

“I *cannot* miss any more classes.”

“Scott.”

“I missed *thirty-eight* last semester.”

“Scott.”

“Lydia’s mom is the only reason I’m still in school!” Scott argues. Then, hoping to ease the blow of rejection, “I can go after school?”

“You know what?” Stiles says, throwing his arms up. “Forget it. I’ll take Liam.”

Stiles looks out past the awning towards the Quad. There, Liam is sitting on one of the blue benches, appearing *very* busy with his tongue down Hayden’s throat. Isaac quickly turns away and Stiles quickly loses that idea.

Eyebrows pulled together in mild disgust, he says, “Yeah. I’m not taking Liam.”

“Hey,” Sydney interrupts, cheery and bright, “can I get a candid?”

“Uh, no,” Stiles says at the same time as Scott says, “Yeah, sure.” He grabs Stiles’ arm and tugs him back towards the bench, not allowing

him to worm free or escape.

“Okay,” Stiles concedes, getting forced between Scott and Lydia. He pulls a shard of glass from his pocket, “If you can explain to me why this is blue, I’ll let it go.”

Scott takes the glass. He spins it in his fingers a few times, letting it glint under the stream of sunlight breaking through the cover of the awning. He looks inspecting and considering.

“Everyone smile!” Sydney directs.

Isaac has to slide in close to Scott to stay in the frame of the photo. He tries not to focus too much on the pressing of their arms together and the warmth of Scott’s side. He definitely fails miserably, only hopes that it doesn’t show on his face, hopes he’s imagining the heat of his cheeks.

The camera clicks. Luckily, without flash.

—

Stiles corners Isaac in the hallway. He points at him, harsh and pinning, “You are such a traitor.”

“What?” Isaac flounders. “Wh-Why?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles exclaims, arms thrown up and voice sounding just as confused as Isaac feels. “For some reason, it feels *personal* when you do it.”

“Do what?” Isaac asks, suppressing a flinch but blinking rapidly.

“Deny my theories!” Stiles whisper-shouts, just quiet enough for the cover of the hallway, but loud enough to express his dislike.

Isaac sighs. “What happened to the Stiles that *expected* me to butt heads with him? Can we bring him back?”

Stiles glares at him, “Don’t crap on my character development. Besides, it’s your fault. You tried too hard to be nice and ended up enabling me. Now, you have to deal with the consequences.”

“By... continuing to enable you?” Isaac guesses.

“Yes.”

Isaac rolls his eyes. “Stiles–”

He’s interrupted by Scott. He rushes over to the pair, eyes lit up with exhilaration and the spark of an idea. That piques Isaac’s interest.

“I spoke to Mrs. Finch,” Scott says. And, without taking a single breath, “She said a muzzle flash is caused by super-heated gasses from the gun. If those include copper, barium, or cesium, then it could glow blue.”

Stiles looks like he’s going to shake right out of his skin, inappropriate excitement bubbling up and spilling forth with, “Could that tint the glass?”

Scott shrugs, “Maybe, I don’t know, but Mrs. Finch doesn’t think so.”

“So, there’s no explanation for the blue tint?” Isaac asks.

Scott shakes his head, “No.”

“So...?” Stiles tests.

“So,” Scott repeats and starts making his way towards the two double doors, expecting Stiles and Isaac to follow.

They do. The three of them approach the doors at a quick speed, with Stiles looking at Scott and asking, “Thirty-nine?”

“Thirty-nine,” Scott parrots in agreement.

But, just as they reach the door, Natalie Martin pushes through. She almost hits them in the face with the blue of the corner, but doesn’t appear to be even remotely apologetic.

“None of you are going anywhere,” she says, arms crossed over her chest. She’s got a dangerous glint in her eyes, shining sharp even behind the rims of her glasses. She turns that look on Scott, saying, “Thirty-eight classes, Scott. I had to *beg* the superintendent.”

“Mrs. Martin,” Stiles levels, “Scott is the sworn protector of Beacon Hills.”

“He can protect it at 3:30,” Mrs. Martin says, giving Stiles and Scott a light shove back towards the heart of the school. She doesn’t lay a hand on Isaac, but he’s pretty sure that’s just coincidence and the fact that she only has two.

Stiles sighs and mumbles as they walk away, “We are *not* waiting till 3:30.”

They wait till 3:30.

They take the Jeep to the address Alex gave the police, finding a huge brick house with overcast skies. The entire mood feels dreary and glum. It feels foreboding, like the gray overhead is seeping into the emotional atmosphere.

“That’s not creepy at all,” Stiles says sarcastically.

Stiles looks back at Scott and Isaac. They share in a moment of silent connection, feeling the foreboding of the dark skies and the unwelcoming of the barren windows. Then, Stiles hands them each a flashlight and they embark into the house.

The interior is just as abandoned as expected. The rooms are drab and empty, coated with a thin layer of dust and cobwebs. The floors squeak as they walk, a spare leaf crunching under foot. There’s old glassware on the kitchen table, similarly unused and worn with time. The entire place feels forgotten.

“You wanna split up?” Scott asks.

“Uh, absolutely not,” Stiles answers.

Scott quirks his lips in a subtly amused lilt. He tips his head towards the stairs, guiding their direction and leading them up dark and creaking steps. They move slow and cautious, shining light over the chilling stairwell.

On the second floor, they walk down a long, narrow hallway. It’s lined with empty rooms and glass doorknobs.

“Maybe Alex got the address wrong?” Scott speculates.

Isaac takes a more realistic approach, “Or he lied.”

If Isaac could have gotten away with it, he would have never told the cops his real address. There were horrors in that house that he didn’t want anyone seeing. Maybe that’s what Alex is doing. Maybe he’s covering something. Something worse than abandoned bedrooms.

“Why would he lie?” Scott asks.

He looks over his shoulder at Isaac, and, when their eyes meet, Isaac knows the realization has hit. He sees it when Scott remembers the basement and the scratched up floors and the empty, unplugged freezer. Scott scrunches his nose in apology, wincing at his own misstep. Isaac shrugs him off, trying to communicate that, *it's fine*.

Because it is. It's a good thing that Scott doesn't immediately think the worst. It's a good thing that he doesn't define Isaac by the hauntings of his past. He's not forgetful, he just doesn't have the same experience. And that's good. Isaac would never wish for anyone to experience what he did – let alone Scott.

They come up to the last door in the hall. It's at the very end and it's the only one that's closed.

They pause just outside the door. There's a brief flicker of hesitation, then Stiles reaches for the knob. He turns it in his grip and presses forward. The door pops open to reveal an unlikely sight.

Isaac doesn't know what he was expecting. More empty corners or some dark secret or possibly bloodshed. He definitely wasn't expecting this.

It's a child's bedroom. And it's perfectly intact.

There's no dust bunnies or cobwebs. There's no wear or tear or aging. Everything is pristine – messy, but only in a lived in sort of way.

"He didn't lie," Stiles says, entering the room and clicking off his flashlight. Scott and Isaac do the same.

"Why didn't the cops say anything about this?" Scott questions.

"They don't know it's here," Stiles says. Then, when he's met with blank stares, "They can't come in without a warrant, and there's no owner of record to serve a warrant to." His voice is shaking just a little, a slight tremble of unrecognizable emotion. "So, unless there's some kind of threat or imminent danger, they wouldn't come in."

Isaac hears something rattle. It's too close to a chain, to a lock, to a freezer door. He flinches, knows the fear is plain on his face.

"What?" Stiles asks.

"I..." Isaac can't finish his sentence. He can't tell if it's real or not. Logically, he knows that the Dread Doctors are gone, but he can still

hear his mother's voice and still feel the killing itch of mountain ash. He knows he shouldn't be having another hallucination. He shouldn't, but—

"I heard it too," Scott says. His voice comes gentle and easy, like a soothing warmth, a wash of sunlight.

Isaac tries not to be too obvious about his exhale of relief. Instead, he just follows Scott back down the hallway and towards the stairs.

—

The downstairs is just as empty as they left it.

Or...

Maybe even more so.

The kitchen table is now cleared of plates and cutlery. Isaac shoots a nervous look towards Scott, trying to suss out if he's noticed the difference. Scott's eyes are widened and sharpened with fear. So, yeah, he's noticed too.

Isaac feels a little less crazy with Scott at his side. If they're both seeing or hearing things, at least they're going through it together.

They start towards the kitchen, but then the floor begins to creak with footsteps that aren't theirs. Isaac and Scott go perfectly still. They listen for half a second, hearing another set of approaching steps.

Then, they turn and rush towards the sound. They round the corner, preparing to strike, and nearly slam straight into... *Liam and Mason?*

Very composed, all four of them jump and gasp. Isaac ends up with a hand around Scott's wrist. Because of course he does. Isaac can feel the rabbiting of Scott's pulse beneath his fingers, and he tears his hand away quicker than what is strictly necessary.

Liam is the first to get himself together, hands on his hips and panting, "What – What are you doing here?"

Scott sighs, dipping his head in a fluid motion, "This is Alex's house." He narrows his eyes at Liam, repeats the question back to him, "What are *you* doing here?"

"This is where the compass lead us."

“What compass?” Scott asks.

Mason steps closer, holding out his hand. In his palm, is a golden compass. Isaac doesn’t know much about them – he never did Scouts or anything of the sorts – but he knows the needle shouldn’t be spinning like that. It’s rapid and whirring, flicking with a soft mechanical sound.

“Why’s it doing that?” Isaac asks, looking between Mason and the needle.

“I have no idea,” Mason says, eyes wide and morbidly excited. (It’s good to see that his stint as the Beast didn’t completely destroy his almost youthful enthusiasm.)

“They’re all doing it,” Liam says, bringing out his phone and revealing the compass app. He’s right. It’s spinning just the same.

Then, out of nowhere, the glass of the real compass shatters. It’s followed by a bang from upstairs.

It’s then that Isaac really realizes Stiles isn’t with them. It wasn’t a concern before. He merely assumed Stiles was looking for more clues in Alex’s bedroom. But, now, it’s definitely the most important detail.

Isaac doesn’t wait for the others. He runs straight towards the stairs, knowing they’ll follow. He takes the steps two at time, coming to the top a little breathless – with fear, more than exertion – and, “What? What happened?”

The four of them sprint towards Stiles. He looks scared, like he’s seen a ghost.

“He was here,” Stiles says. His hand jumps at his side, like he’s trying to punctuate his point. “He shot at me.”

Stiles turns back towards the bedroom door. He runs his hands over the surface, as if he’s expecting a physical mark or evidence. He doesn’t waver when there’s nothing there, though. Instead, he just reiterates, “It was one of the guys you saw in Alex’s memory.”

“The guy who took his parents?” Mason questions, clarifying.

“No, no, no,” he says. “They weren’t just taken. They were–” Stiles looks down, like the pieces are still coming together, like the image isn’t fully formed yet. “They were made to *disappear*. That’s why

there's no furniture, that's why they weren't in any of the photos."

Isaac feels a little lightheaded with the whirlwind revelation.

Then, Stiles breathes, "They were erased."

Stiles rushes towards Alex's bedroom, swinging the door open, and...

It's completely empty.

Isaac throws the lacrosse ball to Scott, probably with a little too much force, if the way Scott grunts to catch it is anything to go by.

"Sorry," Isaac calls, only loud enough to be heard by Scott and not the rest of the team. "It's just. I'm on edge."

Scott throws the ball back, not looking at all bothered, just saying, "We all are."

Isaac snags the ball in the pocket of his stick. He sighs, slinging it a little, readjusting his grip. He takes aim again, saying as he fires off another shot, "I keep thinking it's familiar, you know? Like, I've heard it before."

It's a lingering thought Isaac can't reach.

"It's okay," Scott says. "Alex is at the station with Parrish. He's safe there."

Isaac misses the next throw from Scott. He hears the name and, suddenly, it all comes back to him. All of his research about hellhounds, all the dead ends, and all the references to—

"Isaac?"

"The Wild Hunt," Isaac says, looking up and nearly dropping his lacrosse stick in excitement. "The Ghost Riders. They – They come by storm, riding horses, and they *take* people. Scott, that's it. It has to be."

Scott is looking at him with something akin to awe.

After practice, they go in search of Stiles, but he finds them first. He

sprints up to them, calling, “Scott, Isaac. Scott!”

They slow down enough for Stiles to catch up.

“Hey,” Stiles pants, winded from his sprint, but unwilling to slow down. “It’s called the Wild Hunt.”

“We know,” Scott says.

“Wh – You know? How do *you* know?”

“Isaac figured it out,” Scott says. He looks way too smug about it. Isaac would really like him to stop it. (Please.)

“Oh,” Stiles says. Then, as if they don’t already know, he continues, like he can’t help himself, “Well, it’s a myth. Only, apparently, it’s real.”

Isaac grumbles an interruption of, “Like every other myth in this town that should just really remain a nightmare.”

“Hang on,” Stiles says, cutting to a stop as a group of lacrosse players walk by them in the overpass. “That’s my jersey!” he calls to one of the players. “Where’d you get that?”

“Coach gave it to me at practice,” the player in number 24 says. He continues walking, not stopping and not really caring for Stiles’ declaration.

“We had practice?” Stiles exclaims, turning now to Scott and Isaac. “Why doesn’t anyone tell me anything?”

Scott puts a hand on Stiles’ shoulder, tamping down the excessive outburst of irritation. He turns them back to the more important topic at hand, “Why would the Ghost Riders want to take Alex’s parents?”

“Because that’s what they do,” Stiles says, dropping his volume back to a regular conversation level, if not a little softer. “They take people, okay? They run around collecting souls. And, once they take you, you’re gone.”

“But it’s not just you,” Isaac says. “It’s *everything* about you.”

“Yeah, like how they took Alex’s room,” Stiles says. As soon as the words leave his mouth, the realization dawns.

Scott looks between Isaac and Stiles, frantic energy in his gaze, “Does

that mean Alex is next?"

More than likely, neither says.

They get to the station as quickly as they can, but, as soon as they run towards the empty cell, Isaac knows they're too late.

"Where's the kid?" Stiles asks. "What happened to him?"

Parrish looks at Stiles like he's speaking a foreign language. "What kid?"

"Alex," Stiles says. "The kid from the car wreck? The kid whose parents went missing last night?"

Parrish shakes his head. His eyebrows draw together in confusion, squinting with narrow-eyed curiosity. "Who's Alex?"

The feeling of foreboding is growing stronger now. Something terrible is happening. Isaac can feel it in the air around them, like the moment before a storm. It's thick and static and tingly, a wash of uncertainty and frozen fear.

"Parrish, listen to me," Stiles says, deathly quiet. "He was here, okay? You *met* him."

Parrish's eyebrows raise and he shakes his head again.

Scott takes a step closer, asks, "Where's the sheriff?"

"He got called out to the high school. They found a body," Parrish says, seeming to lift a little at a question he can actually answer. Then, to Stiles, he reiterates, "No one's been in lock-up all day."

Stiles just stares at him.

Parrish grabs a clipboard off the counter and passes it to Stiles, saying, "Check for yourself."

Then, he turns and leaves the room, presumably getting back to his job. Meanwhile, Stiles rips through the intake log forms. Each and every one is blank. There's no evidence of Alex being here.

There's no evidence of his existence.

“He’s not on here,” Stiles says, unnecessary as the statement is. He whispers, “They took him.”

Scott stares at the empty jail cell, then over to Isaac and Stiles. “I shouldn’t have left him alone.”

Isaac opens his mouth to protest, to tell Scott that this is in no way his fault, but Stiles speaks first, says, “He knew they were coming for him.”

Scott’s heartbeat stutters in his chest, skipping and jolting with, “What if they’re coming back for everyone on that road?”

Stiles looks up from the blank forms. “Then we already know who’s next.”

“Liam and Hayden.”

—

It feels a little like *deja vu*, this rushing to rescue Liam and Hayden. But Isaac blocks those thoughts from his mind. He doesn’t want to think about that day. He *can’t*. He needs to focus. They can’t be too late this time.

Blue and red flash through the night air of the parking lot, filling the atmosphere with a colorful glow and illuminating the sign of the school – long since replaced after the attack of the Beast.

The three of them sprint into the hallway, bursting through blue double doors. The school is busier than it should be this late at night, scattered with mulling students, faculty, and law enforcement personnel.

“I’ll check the Quad,” Scott says. “Let me know if you find them. And... see if your dad knows anything?”

“Yeah, okay,” Stiles says.

Scott turns to run back out into the night air, but Stiles stops him with, “Hey, Scott? Wait.”

Scott’s shoes squeak against the floor. “Yeah?”

“Um... I – I just. Uh,” Stiles sighs, “I wanted to say... um.”

Scott looks at Stiles expectantly, but, when he doesn’t seem to have

the words to finish his sentence, he gives warm eye contact and, “Tell me later?”

“Yeah, all right,” Stiles says.

And, this time, when Scott turns to leave, Stiles lets him go.

“Uh, okay,” Isaac says. He throws his thumb towards an adjacent hallway, “I’ll check near the locker rooms,” and he points to the extending entry hall, “and you go this way?”

“Okay,” Stiles says, nodding rapidly in agreement.

And then, they split up.

—

Isaac runs down winding hallways, looping around corners and feeling more than a little terrified. Unfortunately, the locker room is empty of people. But, a little more favorable, it’s not devoid of scent. Isaac catches Liam and Hayden’s, two scents intertwined and mixed, drifting in the air around him. Isaac locks onto the smell and follows it.

He sprints down the corridor, skipping over tiles and rounding classrooms. The trail leads him back towards the entry hall, opening up to a more crowded space, to the younger members of the pack.

Liam, Hayden, and Mason are all together.

They’re just standing there. They’re not gone and they’re not taken. They’re talking to somebody Isaac doesn’t recognize, and, even though it might be rude, he interrupts.

“Hey, Liam,” he calls, sliding to a stop beside them, “you guys okay?”

Liam nods, but he doesn’t take his eyes off the stranger.

“Isaac?”

The guy is staring right at him. His eyes are a little wet and he smells of anxiety, harsh and strong and terrible. And, beneath the unshed tears, is the unmistakable gleam of recognition. He’s looking at Isaac like he knows him.

“Uh,” Isaac says. The relief in him goes a little torrid and sour. “Sorry, have we – have we met before?”

The guy falls back a step, like he's just been shoved. He looks like he's going to lose his balance, but then he steadies and shakes his head. There's a tugging at the back of Isaac's mind, like a loose thread being pulled, like the taut stretch of yarn.

But then, the stranger turns his back and the air goes slack again.

—

Lydia looks lost. She's standing at the start of the hallway, eyes vacant and searching. She doesn't continue in her trek, just stops in her tracks – frozen, almost. It doesn't take long for the others to notice. There's quick glances of shared worry, the collective concern of friends, and then they're pressing off their lockers to approach.

“You okay?”

Lydia blinks away the haze in her emerald eyes, but she doesn't turn from the stretch of the hall. She keeps staring forward, voice wispy with, “I have this feeling like I was supposed to do something.”

Allison puts a gentle hand on Lydia's shoulder, anchoring her with the touch. “Do what?”

Lydia looks up at her, head giving the smallest of shakes. Sounding almost pained by it, she says, “I can't remember.”

Superposition

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 2

Word count: 7,377

Chapter Notes

Your reactions on the last chapter were gold thanks for letting me laugh at your shock <3

Scott bends to scoop up a lacrosse ball. He's wearing a t-shirt that puts his tattoo on display and distracts Isaac with accidental sufficiency. Isaac tries to stay focused on the task at hand, tries to ignore the meaning in those two bands and the feeling that lifts in his chest. He's already fumbled one too many shots to continue messing up. If he slips anymore, Scott's going to start asking if he's okay, and then Isaac will be royally screwed.

Scott turns to look over his shoulder, staring out at the rest of the field, "Did you feel that?"

"Feel what?" Liam asks. He flips his stick in his grip a few times, simultaneously fidgeting and readjusting.

Scott looks back at Liam and Isaac, "Thought I heard something." He turns his head again. He looks away for a long moment. One, two, three seconds. He gets this intensity about him as he trains his hearing, perked up with a tilt of his head. Isaac pointedly avoids any and all dog jokes. Then, Scott gives up, "Forget it. Let's keep going."

He throws the ball to Liam, soaring through the air and straight into the pocket of his net.

"Or we could call it," Liam suggests, faking casual.

"We gotta work on your backshots," Scott says. He's leaning forward, equipment in hand and ready to play.

Liam is less animated. He's still twisting his lacrosse stick in his hand, standing there looking bored and a little tired. "Why?"

"Liam, they *suck*."

“What are you talking about?” Liam asks. His eyebrows crinkle up and he actually looks a little offended.

“Your backshots,” Scott says. “Which suck.”

Liam’s eyebrows drop and the irritation falls into place.

Isaac tips his weight back onto his heels, flicking his attention between alpha and beta.

Isaac and Scott have been taking turns helping Liam get ready for captain tryouts (since Scott has elected to give the position up this year – something about focusing on his grades). Isaac’s pretty sure the whole thing is entirely unnecessary, considering Liam completely demolished him all of five minutes ago, but he just stands on the sideline and watches with smug amusement as Liam starts slinging backshot after backshot.

Each and every one hits the net.

Scott’s expression shifts in confusion. He shakes his head, says, “I must’ve been thinking about someone else.”

“Yeah. Maybe someone else who should be captain,” Liam says, casually tossing a ball over to Scott.

He snags it out of the air, “You’ll make it.”

Then, the stadium lights of the lacrosse field turn off. One by one, with a loud click, they fade into nothing, dousing the field in darkness.

“Well, I guess we have to go now,” Liam says, clearly desperate to be finished. (Which just adds to the unnecessary-ness of it all. Liam doesn’t even want to be here.)

But, of course, Scott has always been persistent.

“No, we don’t,” he says. Scott lifts his gaze, revealing his eyes burning fierce and red and bright.

Liam shines gold eyes back.

“Come on, Isaac. Get in here for two-on-ones,” Scott says. Then, “Liam’s backshots might not suck, but his teamwork...”

Isaac groans loudly, but his irises turn to a ring of glowing sulfur.

—

They work until Isaac and Liam succeed in scoring against Scott, but they don't have the opportunity to get into a solid momentum. As soon as the first shot is made, Liam is letting his grip go slack. His stick nearly falls from his fingers as the ball rolls onto the field. He stares off into the distance, towards the school with a sharpness in his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Isaac asks.

"Something's happening to Mason," Liam says, not letting his eyes divert for even a second. Once the words are out of his mouth, he's abandoning his stick and running towards the school.

Isaac and Scot share a quick connection of stunned eye contact, but quickly follow after Liam. Neither one questions how he knows, neither one asks what's happening. With the Beast at the back of their minds, they sprint towards the school and towards the library.

As they ram through the double doors, Mason and Corey come at them with a fire hydrant and a chair for weapons. (Isaac's previous advice must have really stuck.) Scott gasps, Liam flinches, and Isaac stumbles backwards, but, luckily, Mason and Corey pull back just in time to avoid a collision.

"They were here," Mason says, not wasting a breath. His voice is rich with residual nerves, "The Ghost Riders."

"Here?" Scott clarifies, on the edge of incredulous. "Just now?"

"I thought they left when the storm left," Liam says, eyes darting around the group.

"I guess not because two of them," Mason points to the upper-level of the library, the banisters, "were right up there."

"What were they doing?"

Mason seems to lose his stride with the question. He turns to Corey, gesturing a hand between them, and, with an air of uncertainty, "We didn't see when they came in. We only saw them when we turned invisible."

Liam turns on Corey quicker than Isaac can anticipate. He takes a step closer to him, voice and expression lit with anger. It's accusatory and

unfair, “You brought him into this?”

Corey’s mouth is parted open and his eyes are wide.

Mason quickly sidesteps in front of him, saying, “He was trying to protect me.”

“They didn’t seem to *care* about us,” Corey says, eyes drifting between Liam and Mason. “They – They walked right by us.”

“Then what happened?” Isaac asks, hoping to redirect or distract Liam from his anger. There’s a protectiveness in Isaac, a flare that blooms wherever Corey is involved. He’s not sure exactly when it started, likely sometime between Scott’s claws and Eichen House.

Corey looks up at the banister, then back to Mason. Mason looks straight at him, but there’s no clarity. There seems to only be confusion between them, like they don’t know the answer, like they’re recounting a memory from years past and not minutes ago.

Mason smacks his lips together, “Uh... they just jumped down and left.”

There’s something wrong about it – something missing. But Mason’s heart rate doesn’t change and Isaac trusts him not to lie about something so important.

“That’s it?” Liam questions.

Mason looks to Corey for confirmation, who says, “Yeah.”

“They didn’t take someone?” Scott asks. He sounds disbelieving, but not unkind. He’s confused, more than anything. “There was nobody else in here?”

Mason and Corey look at each other again. They seem a little lost, a little freaked out, a little off kilter.

“No,” Corey says. Stutters, “It – It was just us.”

—

After that, Scott and Liam head home, but Isaac has to wait for Derek to pick him up, so he hangs back with Mason and Corey. The latter looks hurt and a little sad.

“Give Liam some time,” Mason says, gentle and soft. “He’s...

protective. And,” Mason winces a little but still has the honesty to admit, “he has good reason to be.”

Corey nods, but his mood doesn't lift. Isaac gets the ridiculous urge to say something like, *you're a good kid, Corey*. He doesn't, of course. Because Corey is only a year younger than him, and, again, it's ridiculous. Instead, he asks, “How did the extra credit go?”

Surprisingly, the awkward small talk question works in loosening the reins of the atmosphere. Corey gets this slight smile and says, “It was good. Except Mason ended up basically teaching the assignment. Just a complete show off, honestly.”

Mason scoffs and Isaac laughs.

“That reminds me of—” The end of the sentence gets caught in Isaac's throat. Cut off and stilted, the words won't come free.

“Lydia?” Mason prompts, naturally patient with a slight lift of his brow.

Isaac shakes his head and swallows, “Yeah...” he says. “Yeah. Lydia.”

They fall into easy conversation. About know-it-alls and classes and lacrosse. About, “Have you seen *The Amazing Spider-Man*? Corey refuses to watch it with me.”

Corey makes an affronted noise, “Mason just has a crush on Andrew Garfield.”

Isaac laughs again. “Yeah, I've seen it twice.”

“Twice?” Corey exclaims. “Oh god. You're worse than Mason. Now there's two of you.” He looks up at the ceiling, whispers, “Spare me.”

Mason looks like he wants to tackle Corey, but instead just elbows him in the ribs. Corey bumps him back and they go on like that for a couple seconds, knocking their shoulders together, back and forth. Isaac watches them with a fond smile, maybe something a little bittersweet hiding underneath.

Then, Isaac hears the telltale sound of Derek's engine. He says, “You two going to be okay?”

Corey and Mason stop their flirting to look at him. They both nod and Mason says, “Yeah, yeah, we're good.” Then, “Is Derek here?”

“Just pulled in,” Isaac confirms.

“We’ll get going then,” Mason says. And it’s then that Isaac realizes they were waiting with him, that they had no other reason to stay this long.

Isaac’s heart warms. He bids them good night and heads out to the front of the school where he finds familiar headlights and Derek waiting for him with a smile.

Isaac slams the car door a little harder than necessary, just a subconscious outlet of his stress and anxiety. Being around Mason and Corey might’ve dulled it for a few minutes, but it’s still there, lingering under the skin like an itch that can’t be scratched.

“Hey,” Derek says, concern tinting his voice, “everything okay?”

Isaac looks at him and says, “Well, it looks like the Ghost Riders aren’t really gone.”

—

Isaac goes to school the next day with a strange feeling of foreboding. The atmosphere of Beacon Hills has gone taut with tension again. Everything feels unknown and out of place. He feels wrong in ways that he can’t explain.

It’s an uncomfortable feeling, one that leaves him dazed and out of focus. Enough so that Liam is able to sneak up on him. He randomly appears in front of Isaac, blocking his path in the hallway and asking, “Why aren’t you trying out for captain?”

Isaac startles a little in surprise, but settles quickly. He draws his eyebrows together and, “What?”

“You’re older than me and just as good as me. Coach would definitely pick you. So…” Liam says, “why aren’t you trying out for captain?”

“I don’t want to,” Isaac says with a shrug.

“Because you’re scared?”

Isaac huffs a little. He levels Liam with a look, says simply, “Because it’s not my thing.”

“You’d be good at it,” Liam says. He sounds like he’s making a case, like he’s trying to convince Isaac to agree. It’s misguided, if a little

sweet.

“It’s never been something I cared about,” Isaac says. Then, a little unfair, he tacks on, “Not like you.”

Liam goes quiet. He looks down at his feet, seeming caught out and nervous.

“Liam,” Isaac says. He keeps his voice gentle, waits until Liam meets his eyes, then, “You’ve been talking about being captain since the first time we met. You can’t chicken out now. You’ll regret it, if you do.”

“I know that,” Liam says. “It’s just—” He exhales. “I’m not like Scott.”

“No one is like Scott,” Isaac says. Liam frowns at him, like that doesn’t make him feel any better, but Isaac just keeps going with his reassurance, “That doesn’t mean you can’t be a good captain. You’ll be a *great* captain, your *own* kind of captain.”

“That’s cheesy as hell,” Liam deflects.

Isaac scoffs a laugh, “Yeah, well.” Then, “I’m not trying out for captain. But you are.”

Liam looks like he wants to protest, but he drops his shoulders and nods, turning to walk away without another word.

—

Isaac walks the halls towards his French class, but comes to a sudden and unexpected stop. He doesn’t know what he’s doing, just feels his feet glue to the ground. He stares at the locker to his right. He looks up at the number, 1075.

Isaac nearly reaches towards the lock, but then Allison steps up next to him, saying, “Hey, Isaac.”

It’s the second time today someone has caught him off guard. He gives a little jump and a startled, “Hi.”

Allison’s brown eyes turn worried and soft, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Isaac whispers. He looks at the locker again, but shakes his head and rolls his shoulders back, pushing the strange feeling aside. “Yeah, I’m good.”

“Good,” Allison smiles, all bright eyes and white teeth and dimples.

“Ready for French?”

Isaac agrees and they head on their way, but then, as they’re walking, he sees Mason and Corey being escorted out of the office. It sparks a flare of worry in his stomach and he can’t ignore it.

To Allison, he says, “Hang on.”

She stops walking, turning to look at him. She doesn’t say anything, but her eyes are expectant in a request for explanation. Isaac jerks his head towards Mason and Corey. Allison sees them, nods, and the silent communication ends there. They move in sync towards the two juniors, crossing the hallway and cutting them off in their path.

This time, Isaac is the one making someone jump. Mason gives a startled little sound, but Corey doesn’t seem all that surprised.

“What’s going on?” Isaac asks, skipping the formalities and going right to the crux of the issue. There’s no denying the frenetic energy warping around Mason and Corey. It’s thick and heavy and palpable.

Mason and Corey share a glance at each other, then Allison, and lastly Isaac. Mostly looking at him, Mason whispers, “We think the Ghost Riders took someone last night.”

“What?” Isaac asks, word out of his mouth before he can even process what’s been said. “I thought—”

“I know,” Mason says. Quickly and a little desperate, he continues, “I know what we said, and we weren’t – we weren’t lying, I swear.”

“Mason, I don’t think you were lying,” Isaac says, being as sincere, kind, patient as he can manage. “Just. Can you explain?”

Mason nods, “Yeah, sorry, it – Neither of us can really remember what happened,” he says, gesturing to Corey. “We were in the library and the Ghost Riders were there, but it just doesn’t make sense for them to have left without doing anything, you know? So, then we got to thinking that... maybe... maybe they did take someone.”

“But why wouldn’t you remember?” Allison asks. “Ghost Riders don’t affect memory.” Then, looking at Isaac, “Do they?”

Isaac shrugs, “Not from anything I’ve read, but,” he looks at Mason and Corey, “you’re right. It’s weird that they would show up again and then not do anything.”

“We tried to check the attendance record to see who didn’t show up at school today, but Mrs. Martin...” Mason shrugs. “Well. You saw,” he says, referencing her guiding them right out of the office, not dissimilar to the way Scott and Isaac—

Something weird happens in Isaac’s memory. He remembers Mrs. Martin pushing them back through the double doors when the Ghost Riders first made their appearance two weeks ago. He remembers seeing Mrs. Martin with two hands splayed out, but he also distinctly remembers her *not* touching him.

“We were going to try to talk to Parrish,” Corey says, breaking through the swirl of thoughts clouding Isaac’s mind. “You know, see if anyone’s been reported missing. Or something.”

Isaac nods, “That’s a good idea.” Then, “But let me and Allison go. Parrish will take to us better.”

Mason and Corey look a little offended and a little unhappy with being sidelined, but neither one protests outwardly. Mason just says, “Yeah, okay.” And, “Good luck.”

—

Isaac disregards Derek’s threat of grounding and skips French class. Allison doesn’t have a threat to worry about since her grades are perfect and, somehow, her attendance record hasn’t suffered as badly as the rest of the pack’s. And so, together, the two of them sneak out to the parking lot, settling into Allison’s car.

“You know, I had never skipped school before I moved to Beacon Hills,” Allison says conversationally. She drives them out onto the main road, headed towards the station with easy familiarity.

“Really?” Isaac asks. Though, if he’s honest, he had never skipped before becoming a fugitive. There was too much risk of repercussion if he did. It never seemed worth it.

“Scott convinced me to ditch on my seventeenth birthday,” Allison says. She gets this fond sort of smile, something like the nostalgia of looking back at a first love come to pass. It makes Isaac’s heart shatter and ache. “He completely corrupted me.”

Isaac gives a shallow laugh, “Hah. Yeah.”

Allison looks over at him, something curious in the brown of her eyes.

“What about you? When was the first time you skipped?”

“I don’t remember,” Isaac lies. It was the night after his first full moon, when he was locked in a tiny jail cell, when Allison and Scott were gallivanting around his childhood home. The next day, he skipped school because he was a target of the law. He spent the day in an abandoned train car by himself. Not exactly the romantic getaway Allison is describing, not exactly the kind of story he wants to tell.

Allison just hums and keeps driving.

Parrish is busy when they find him and not super susceptible to two over eager and curious teenagers. Still, Isaac *knows* Parrish has a soft spot for him. There’s a kinship between them, a connection that was forged in the presence of a headstone. So, he doesn’t give in easily to the cold shoulder. Parrish tries to brush him off and turn back to his work, but Isaac presses.

“No one’s unaccounted for?” he asks.

“You can reword the question as much as you want, Isaac. The answer,” Parrish says, looking up from the file cabinet he’s rummaging through, “is still no.”

“Do you feel anything?” Isaac asks, keeping his voice low. “Do you have any supernatural intuition?”

“I’m a harbinger of death,” Parrish says. “Not a harbinger of kidnapping. And, besides, if you want a prediction, you should really be talking to Lydia.”

Isaac sighs. They probably should talk to Lydia, but that’s not the point. The point is that Parrish is a hellhound. He’s linked to the Wild Hunt, even if he doesn’t know or care. He has a connection and he could help them, if he was just willing to give them the time of day.

But, clearly, he’s not. He says, “I’m also a sheriff’s deputy working on an unsolved murder that, for once, doesn’t involve shape-shifters, resurrected eighteenth century murderers, or me. It’s just a straightforward robbery-homicide.”

“Straightforward?” Allison asks. She looks a little disgruntled, but she keeps his voice soft and easy. “Wasn’t he bludgeoned to death and stuffed in a high school air duct?”

Parrish sighs. He looks at Isaac and says, “Look, if I thought I could help, I would. But there’s been no one reported missing and I *don’t* have a feeling about this. Just—” Parrish shakes his head. “Go back to school? Derek would chew me out if he knew you ditched to come see me.”

Isaac tips his head back with a groan.

“Sorry to waste your time,” Allison says, overly polite and understanding.

Parrish gives them a not-so-genuine smile and turns to walk away, entering a room and closing the door fast behind him, leaving them with nothing but a sign that reads, *Authorized Personnel Only*.

As they exit the sheriff’s station, Isaac says, “We weren’t wasting his time.”

Allison shrugs and gets back in the car.

—

Allison and Isaac return to school just as the bell is ringing. It should give them a cover of a crowd, but it doesn’t exactly work out in their favor. They duck behind a light blue car to avoid getting caught as a teacher sweeps by, but they come face to face with Mrs. Martin. She has her arms crossed over her chest and a glare on her features.

She assigns them both detention.

Allison tries to talk her way out of it, but Mrs. Martin doesn’t budge, merely shoos them back towards the school saying, “You have class to get to, don’t you? Or are you going to skip that one too?”

Isaac sighs and Allison gives up. The two of them slip back into school, making eye contact as the doors slam closed behind them. Isaac can’t fight his spark of amusement, feels it creeping in a grin across his cheeks. Allison smiles back, giggles just a little. She waves and turns down one hallway. Isaac returns the gesture and enters Mr. Yukimura’s classroom.

It’s becoming increasingly more normal to see him now that Kira has left. For the first few months, Isaac kept waiting to be pulled aside after class. He kept waiting for Mr. Yukimura to tell him Kira was on her way home, but Isaac’s dropped the wishful thinking now. He knows Kira said it could be months if not years. He knows he

shouldn't hold his breath.

So, instead, he goes to his usual seat in front of Lydia, rotating to look at her, "Hey."

Lydia looks frazzled. She looks frayed around the edges, tired and worn. She looks like she hasn't slept. She says, "Hi."

Isaac frowns. "Are you doing okay?"

Lydia plasters on a fake smile. It stings – that she thinks she needs to do that with Isaac. She simply says, "Yes."

Isaac nods and turns to face the board. He doesn't like the feeling that's settled in his chest. Like pity, like sorrow, like loss.

"Okay, class," Mr. Yukimura begins, "today, we will be examining *The Persistence of Memory* by Salvador Dalí."

—

Isaac fires off a text to Liam: **Good luck at tryouts. I would come watch but I'm in detention with Allison.**

He doesn't get a reply, but he doesn't really mind. He locks his phone and pockets it, lets his forehead come to thump against the edge of the table. Their detention was passed off to Mr. Yukimura, which is nice because he doesn't seem to have any devious plans for them, just intends to let boredom fry their brains.

Something hits Isaac in the head.

It's a balled up piece of notebook paper. And, when he unfurls it, he's met with a note that reads: *At least we're not locked in a janitor's closet.*

Isaac snorts a laugh into his fist, turning to his right to get a look at Allison. She's only a few seats away, along the same row as Isaac, and she's smiling with all her teeth.

This is your fault, Isaac scribbles quickly. He tosses the paper Allison's way without even looking. He hears it crinkling as she reveals the note, hears her mock-offended gasp, hears her pencil scratching along.

He catches the note when she throws it back. This time, there's a third message along the page, a written swirl of: *What makes you say that?*

Isaac glances up at Mr. Yukimura. He's pretty sure the teacher has

already caught on to their antics and just doesn't care. It's a refreshing change of pace from the once harrowing presence of Mr. Harris. (And Isaac doesn't really care if he's dead. It doesn't make him any less of a dick.) He reminds himself to submit Mr. Yukimura's name for teacher of the year.

Isaac writes back: *I've only had detention twice in my life and both times you were there. That seems like a pattern to me.*

Allison rolls her eyes as the paper comes back to her desk. She moves the pencil quickly across the page. She doesn't bother balling it up or throwing it this time, simply slides it over to Isaac, stretching her body to make the reach. In her neat handwriting are the words: *Sounds more like a coincidence.*

—

Derek picks Isaac up after detention, giving Isaac a mockingly disapproving stare and a quiet, "I'm disappointed."

Isaac doesn't laugh like he's supposed to. The whole day feels like a bust. Nothing ever came of the strange feeling in the air or Mason and Corey's hunch. It just feels like Isaac woke up on the wrong side of the bed and everything has been a wash ever since. It's frustrating and annoying and easy for Derek to take notice of.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

Isaac shrugs. "I feel weird."

"What do you mean?" Derek sounds calm and patient and curious. He sounds so normal and unaffected. It grates at Isaac's skin and thaws his frigid center. It's a juxtaposition of infuriating and comforting.

"I don't know," Isaac says. He slumps down in the passenger seat, letting his back slide against leather. "I just. I feel out of sorts."

"Hm," Derek hums in consideration.

Isaac was kind of hoping he would have the magic answer, but he also knows it's not really fair to expect so much from Derek. "*Something* is happening," Isaac says. "I just have no idea what."

Derek nods. "Things seem quiet."

"What do you mean?" Isaac parrots the question.

“Like – not supernaturally quiet, just... generally,” Derek says. The explanation is feeble, but Isaac instantly understands when he says, “Everything feels too quiet.”

“Yeah,” Isaac agrees.

It can't really be justified or intellectualized, but *something* is amiss.

Derek drops Isaac off at work with a promise to return in a few hours. The comic store is a little busier than usual, but Isaac revels in the distraction. He rings up customers and makes casual conversation about their purchases. He's never been the best at these sorts of encounters, but it's made easier by the buffer of comics between them. It's easy to pull up questions and comments and polite smiles.

It's easy, but it's tiring. And, as the end of his shift draws near, Isaac feels run down and exhausted. Today has been so strange and all he wants is to go home.

Isaac hears a soft clatter.

It's not loud, but, in the empty store, it might as well be a gunshot.

Isaac creeps around the counter and down one of the aisles. He inches towards the sound. He's not sure what he's expecting. An intruder, probably. A Ghost Rider, more than likely.

He finds neither.

There's a Batman figurine on the ground.

Isaac reaches down to pick it up. He holds the plastic in his hand, rotating the object in his grip. It feels important in a way that it shouldn't. It's just a children's toy, just an off-balanced action figure that fell from the shelf. But it feels significant. It feels like a weight in his hand, holding him down, pressing him beneath the surface. Like an anchor.

Isaac closes his fist around the figurine. He squeezes hard enough that his knuckles go white. Any tighter and he'd probably break it, which would come right out of his paycheck. So, Isaac sets the action figure back on the shelf.

He doesn't walk away though. He stands there for a moment, just

staring at the black costume and the emblem on his chest.

Then, a car horn honks outside. That's so unlike Derek that it almost sends Isaac into a spiral. Instead, he abandons the Batman figurine and discards his name tag, stepping out into the mild warmth of mid-spring air.

—

Later, back at the loft, Isaac gets ready for bed. He's ready to fall right into sleep, hoping that, tomorrow, things will be better. He longs for that reset, but he won't fall unconscious yet. He waits for a call from Scott.

While he waits, Isaac picks up one of Allison's ring daggers. He holds it in his grip, spinning it around his fingers with practiced ease. It makes him smile, thinking of Allison and this dagger.

But then, the persistent feeling in the pit of his stomach grows stronger. It pulses and throbs, an ache of, *wrong, wrong, wrong*.

Isaac sighs, exhaling all the air in his lungs. He lets the dagger fall to his comforter and follows its movement down and down till he's lying with his head on the pillow and his eyes trained on the ceiling. He begs Scott to call, if only because the silence is starting to eat at his skin.

Luckily, Isaac only has to wait five more minutes for his phone to ring. Isaac answers in seconds. "Hey."

"Hi," Scott says. There's a hint of amusement in his voice, like it wasn't lost on him how quick Isaac was to answer. Isaac doesn't mind the simmer of embarrassment that causes. He mostly just feels settled by Scott's voice. *"I barely saw you today. How are you?"*

Isaac sighs again. He doesn't want to lie to Scott, but he doesn't want to worry him either. He just says, "I don't know." He picks at the skin around his thumbnail, musters up a quiet, "Weird."

"Me too," Scott says, surprising Isaac just a little. *"I've actually just finished talking to Deaton about it."*

If Isaac wasn't so tired, he would sit up with anticipation and wonder. Hoping for a good answer, he asks, "What did he say?"

"Well, I told him I've been feeling like... like there are holes in my

memory.”

It sparks familiarity. Isaac thinks of Mrs. Martin and the double doors, the Batman figurine, the confusion from Mason and Corey. Isaac admits, “I’ve been feeling it too.”

“Really?” Scott asks.

“Yeah,” Isaac says. He didn’t have the language for it before, but, now that Scott’s said it, he knows that’s the feeling. He still doesn’t know quite how to put it into words. It’s like a phantom ache, a stretch of reaching for something long gone. It’s an ingrained instinct that can’t be completed. It’s a memory stuck just behind a wall of fading time.

“I started thinking maybe it could all be connected. The Ghost Riders, the Wild Hunt, the holes,” Scott lists. *“That’s what I was talking to Deaton about.”*

Isaac repeats, “What did he say?”

“Deaton has never heard of the Ghost Riders affecting memory, but that’s no reason to rule out the possibility. I mean, it kind of reminds me of when we read the book, you know? Like, when we had to trigger a memory we couldn’t remember. If... If the Wild Hunt affects memory, then... how would that be documented? How do you remember something you can’t remember?”

Isaac hums in understanding. It makes sense, but that doesn’t mean he likes it. It reminds Isaac of *damnatio memoriae*, of a punishment worse than death, of being more than forgotten. It’s more like being erased, like a person is wiped from existence. Like they never were and they never would be.

The thought turns Isaac’s blood to acid and makes his heart rate skyrocket.

“Deaton thinks my subconscious is trying to tell me what I’m missing,” Scott says.

“And how are we supposed to figure out what it’s saying?” Isaac asks.

“We go to sleep.”

And so, that’s what they do. They’re keyed up and stressed, but it’s easy to find tiredness. It’s easy to cut the usual phone call short when they’re both desperate to fill in the gaps. So, they bid each other good

night and drop off into rest.

Isaac dreams of coffee cups and duct tape and chess pieces. It's a disconnected, disjointed, disorganized mess. He sleeps fitful and restless and wakes to a piercing ring.

He thinks it's a scream, and then realizes it's just his phone. Isaac scrambles to grab it, unlocking and answering, bleary and groggy, "Hello?"

"Um."

"Scott?" Isaac asks. He's waking up more now. Awareness is coming to him in steady increments. He doesn't like the sound of Scott's voice or the rustling in the background.

"So, I – uh, I woke up in the middle of the preserve."

Isaac laughs. He knows he shouldn't, but he can't help it. There's just something so ridiculous about the entire ordeal. He's tired and bordering on delirious and he just... laughs.

"Isaac," Scott complains, a slight whine to his voice. "*This is serious.*"

"Yes," Isaac says, clearing his throat and stamping down on his amusement. "Very serious, sorry."

Scott makes a noise that sounds like a grumpy exhale. It's endearing in all the worst ways. Isaac is suffering.

"So, why did you call? Just to wake me up and make me laugh?"

"No, I... *I need you to meet me out here,*" Scott says. Isaac opens his mouth to protest, but Scott must realize it's coming because he quickly continues, cutting through with, "*I know, but... it's important. Okay?*"

The things Isaac will do for Scott McCall.

He sighs, "Okay. I'll be there soon, just – send me your exact location."

Isaac kind of regrets waking Derek up. He's incredibly tetchy. He keeps yawning and glaring, but Isaac isn't going to walk all the way

from the loft to the preserve. It just isn't going to happen. Even Scott isn't worth that.

So, Isaac drags Derek out of bed and into the woods where they meet with Scott, Malia, Allison, and Lydia.

Scott hands out flashlights, saying, "I went to bed at home and I woke up out in the woods about a mile out. But I think there's a reason why this has happened." Scott starts walking towards the trails, expecting the rest to follow. "I've been out here before. It was the beginning of sophomore year, the night before tryouts for first line. I remember because it was all that I could think about."

They follow the trail and Scott's lead, snaking further into the woods.

"What were you doing?" Malia asks.

"You really shouldn't have been out here," Derek says. He sounds genuinely angry, though they all know he isn't. "It's private property."

Isaac has to stifle a laugh.

Scott ignores Derek and focuses on Malia's question instead, saying, "I was looking for a dead body."

"That's... morbid," Allison says. And even more so knowing that it was Laura Hale.

To Isaac's left, Derek bristles, but he keeps his discomfort to himself.

"So then, what was I doing out here all alone?" Scott poses the question – the reason that they're *all* out here in the middle of the night.

"I wish I could help you, but I didn't know you yet," Lydia says.

"I didn't either," Isaac says. He doesn't mention that he was likely trapped in a freezer or digging graves at the cemetery. It's not important, not really.

"I was still a coyote, so I might've tried to *eat* it," Malia says, not at all helpful.

Derek huffs, "This is my sister you're talking about, you know? Your cousin?"

Malia shrugs. She clearly didn't actually know that, but it also doesn't

seem to matter to her either. Isaac's not really surprised.

"That was around the time my family moved to Beacon Hills," Allison says with a noncommittal shrug. She doesn't say it could've been her who was out here with Scott, but the implication is clear enough. Nobody protests, but Isaac's not sure anyone agrees either.

"Deaton said my subconscious is trying to tell me something," Scott says. He stammers a little, "But I – I need you guys to help me figure out what it's saying."

"Maybe you were just a curious teenager?" Lydia suggests. "You heard there was a body and..."

"But how?" Scott asks, understanding the insinuation in Lydia's trailing sentence, but not quite believing it. "I never watched the news and I didn't have a police scanner."

"Your mom works at the hospital," Malia offers. "Maybe she got called in and you overheard her?"

"My mom wasn't home that night," Scott says. He comes to a stop, turning to look at the rest of the group. His hand jumps at his side, "I live five miles away from here. How did I get here?"

"You drove," Malia says.

Scott shakes his head, "I didn't have a car."

"You ran," she counters.

"I couldn't have. I had asthma."

The pieces aren't coming together. Everything stays disconnected, disjointed, disorganized.

Scott keeps walking, "I was hiding, but they knew that I was here."

"Maybe you made a ton of noise with your asthmatic breathing," Malia says.

This time, Isaac fails to stifle his laughter. He gets a sharp glare from Scott and whispers, "Sorry."

"How would they know that it was me?" Scott asks, slowing down again. "They called for me by name." He shakes his head, "Why would the sheriff even *think* that I would be out here?"

“Maybe, Parrish—”

Scott cuts Allison off. “He hadn’t moved here yet. I mean, Stilinski *still* doesn’t even *know* about the supernatural, but that doesn’t matter because... because *I* wasn’t supernatural yet. I mean, this was the night that I was bitten.”

Isaac clears his throat against the restriction of rising fear, tension, worry.

“I wasn’t a werewolf yet,” Scott looks up, looks out at the group, “and I wasn’t out here alone.”

Isaac finds it difficult to disagree. There’s too much that doesn’t line up. There are too many factors for it to all be one big coincidence.

“I know this sounds crazy,” Scott says. They all watch and wait for the revelation, for Scott to say, slow and fumbled, “But I think I had a best friend.” Then, a little more confident, “And I think he was out here with me that night.”

“It doesn’t sound crazy,” Malia says. She’s the first one to jump on board, which is a little bit surprising considering she was the one trying the hardest to fill in the gaps of Scott’s story. She adds her own explanation of, “I know that someone chained me up and I think they wanted me to stay human.”

The foundation has been thoroughly laid for Isaac not trusting his own memory. Maybe for most the idea of a forgotten person would seem a stretch too far, but not for Isaac. For Isaac, this is an average Tuesday afternoon, this is the language trick of a book about parascientists and a sixth birthday party.

And Isaac can’t say for certain who’s missing or who they were to him. But his usual phantom ache feels a little sharper now, like the lines are less blurred and more harsh. It’s the tickling weeping willow branches of a lost pack member, but there’s a freshness to this bloom. There’s no rot of time or strength of roots. It’s a new thing, an added weight in his chest, an added burden to his list.

He doesn’t know how to say any of this, is the thing. But he knows he has to say something. So, in the end, he borrows Derek’s words and offers a perfect paraphrasing of the feeling of *weird*. “It’s been so quiet today,” he says. “I... kept waiting for...”

Isaac doesn’t finish the sentence. He doesn’t know what he was

waiting for.

“I came to school this morning and I was *sure* I was supposed to meet someone.” Lydia’s voice is small with emotion, trembling just a little. “But I couldn’t remember who it was supposed to be.” She sighs. The words come breathless and distressed, “I have been looking for them *all day*.” Then, “Whoever it is... I think I loved him.”

Scott looks around at the group, a little bit of hope pooling in the brown of his eyes, “What if we’re all missing the same person?”

Nobody jumps to agree, but nobody jumps to disagree either.

Scott reaches into his back pocket. He pulls out a photo, shining his flashlight for everyone to see. It’s the photo Sydney took of them last week. Malia, Lydia, a gap, and then Scott, and Isaac.

“I think he was in this picture,” Scott says.

Lydia reaches out and runs her finger over the gap. “He was sitting right there.”

“Yeah,” Allison says, “or I was.”

Isaac hadn’t even noticed her absence from the photo.

“I went to the bathroom before Sydney came over,” Allison says.

Isaac can’t remember if that’s true or not. All he can really remember is how close he was sitting to Scott, the press of their arms together. And that’s uniquely embarrassing, how clouded his mind gets when Scott is in his personal space.

Isaac looks over at Scott. He sees him staring at Allison, but it’s not with his usual adoration. It’s with doubt and skepticism.

—

Regardless of the photo, there’s enough curiosity and wonder that they aren’t ready to drop the issue yet. So, they venture to the animal clinic to try to get some answers. Deaton takes his time setting up: a blacklight shines upward and the shard of glass Scott couldn’t remember retrieving hangs like a pendulum.

“And now she just magically writes down all the answers?” Malia asks. She sounds unsure and disbelieving.

"It's not quite that simple," Deaton says.

"It never is," Lydia states, dry and sardonic.

"In automatic writing," Deaton says, ignoring Lydia's snark, "the hand moves outside of any conscious awareness." He twirls his own wrist through the air in demonstration. And, looking over at the redhead, "Now, *hopefully*, the silence, the darkness, and the light will allow you to find a more comfortable, relaxed, trance-like state."

Isaac remembers ice baths and hypnosis. He shakes the thoughts from his mind. This isn't going to be nearly as violent or chilling. (Or, like Deaton says, *hopefully* not.)

"Lydia," Deaton says, sliding a blank sheet of paper towards her, "I want you to stare into the light and let go of all thought."

Lydia picks up the pen and the rest turn to walk away, giving her some space and distance to feel less observed, more at ease.

"I have to warn you," Deaton says, speaking to the larger group with a voice pitched low and hushed so as not to distract Lydia as her pen first meets the page, "we may not be able to access these memories."

"Why not?" Scott asks.

"The legend has always been that the Wild Hunt *takes* people. But if what you're telling me is right, then the truth is much worse."

Damnatio memoriae.

"They erase people from reality."

"How do we remember someone who has been completely erased from our minds?" Scott asks. He shakes his head and looks halfway to tugging his hair out. There's frustration in him. Isaac wonders if it's pointed towards Deaton or the general situation.

Regardless, the question hangs heavy in the air. It feels like an impossibility.

But then, Lydia starts scribbling frantically. Her easy demeanor turns rushed and desperate. Her pen scrapes loud against the metal of the table beneath. She writes with purpose and with intention.

"Maybe he hasn't been," Derek says. He juts out his chin in a nod towards Lydia.

Lydia's breathing turns shallow. She's panting and frenzied. She's overwhelmed and fevered. There's a blanket of hysteria around her.

"Oh, is she okay? Should we stop her?" Scott questions, concern rich in his tone.

He takes a step closer, but Deaton puts a hand on his shoulder. He approaches with caution, testing, "Lydia." He stands to the side of her now, asks, "Lydia?" And, "Slow down."

Deaton shuts off the blacklight.

All at once, Lydia drops the pen and stops writing. She stays completely still. Her eyes are dazed and faraway. Disconnected, disjointed, disorganized.

"Is she okay?" Allison asks.

"Lydia?" Deaton calls.

Lydia shows no signs of reaction. She's vacant and shallow. She's practically catatonic.

Malia snatches up the piece of paper. She looks at it for a moment, eyes casting over the page. Then, she quickly puts it back on the table for the rest to see, asking, "What does 'mischief' mean?"

Scott gets one glimpse at the paper and says, "That's not what she wrote."

Scott rights the page, turning it so they can discern the true meaning hidden in the collection of tiny words. Lydia's written *mischief* over and over again. It's not her usual neat handwriting. It's rushed and messy, but the pattern is obvious. Each little word makes up one larger message, one five letter word.

Lydia gasps. She comes to consciousness, eyes sparkling with life and, "What the hell is a Stiles?"

A chill runs down Isaac's spine.

Sundowning

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 3

Word count: 7,737

Chapter Notes

Surprise!!! I'll be posting every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday until the fic is finished!

Isaac doesn't know what they're looking for. Some sort of clue, obviously. Something to spark their memory of the person they're all missing. But specifically? Isaac has no idea what he's looking for. He's flipping through page after page and getting absolutely nowhere.

"Stile," Scott reads off his laptop, "an arrangement of steps that allows people, but not animals, to climb over a fence."

Isaac looks over at him in pure disbelief.

"Yeah," Lydia says, dry and sarcastic, "somehow I *don't* think these are the stiles we're looking for."

"Maybe Malia found something?" Allison suggests, going for hopeful, but falling a little flat.

"No. She's been taking a make-up test all morning," Lydia says.

Then, as if punctuating the statement, a howl filters through the hall and into the library. Instantly, Isaac and Scott recognize it as Malia. It's not hard for the humans to do the same.

"I guess the test isn't going well," Isaac mumbles, closing his book and moving to his feet, following the others in their rush out of the library.

They follow Malia's scent into the basement. Isaac hesitates a moment at the top of the stairs. He hasn't been back down here since he first recovered the memory of his mom. But he doesn't let that fear hold him back, just jogs down the steps, coming to a sliding stop next to Scott.

Malia is in her full coyote form, cowering under a metal shelf and

growling lowly. She's a unique mixture of fear and defense.

"Malia," Scott says, taking a few slow steps forward. "It's okay. You're safe."

Malia snarls, baring sharp canines with glowing blue eyes and a rumbling timber of sound. Isaac has half a mind to growl back, just to get her eyes locked on him instead of Scott. (Which is so unbelievably ridiculous. Isaac actually hates his wolf sometimes.)

"I'm not going to hurt you," Scott says.

He keeps inching forward, but no one else moves. Isaac, Lydia, and Allison stay perfectly still behind him, none willing to take the risk of spooking her.

Isaac hears a fifth set of footsteps joining them, but he doesn't look to see who it is. He keeps his eyes trained on Malia, on the placement of her paws, on the setting of her weight. Isaac's waiting for her to lunge and wondering how he's going to react when she does.

"I think she's calming down," Scott says, speaking to the crowd behind him.

Malia disagrees. She snuffs and snaps her teeth together, still growling and still putting up a front of attack.

"Maybe... you should growl back?" Allison suggests.

Malia's barking intensifies. It makes Mrs. Martin gasp, pulling Isaac's attention towards the newcomer for only half a second.

"Scott," Allison says, leveling with him. "You're the alpha. Can't you just... make her a little more docile?"

Scott looks back at Malia. She's sitting now, but doesn't quiet down or relax.

"She's not the problem," Lydia says, voice barely a whisper. "We are." Then, "This is her territory. We need to get out of here."

They all watch Malia for a few moments longer. They watch her surge up again, barking and huffing and growling.

Then, Scott whispers, "Yeah, come on."

He turns his back on Malia, putting way too much trust in his friends

– as usual – and ushers them around the corner. They pass a line of shelves, crossing round to the other side, where they're close to Malia still, but unseen by the coyote.

"Malia came here to get through the full moons," Lydia says, volume just a tad louder than before. "Then we started using the lake house."

"I thought you said a wild animal got in the lake house," Mrs. Martin says, voice tilting up in a question.

Isaac buries a scoff of ironic laughter in his shoulder.

"Just be happy about all the things I *don't* tell you," Lydia whispers at a quick pace. It seems a strange statement in the dynamic of a parent and child, but, honestly, none of them have ever had traditional relationships with their parents.

Then, there's movement. Malia is still growling, like she can't quite control it, but she's moving out of the makeshift shelter. She walks one, two steps. On the third, paws turn to feet and fur fades into tan skin. And there's that usual modesty. (Isaac very quickly looks away.)

"It's all right. I'm okay," Malia says. Her voice is monotone and a little stiff, but Isaac believes her anyway. Maybe it's just wishful thinking.

Lydia grabs the pile of clothes from her mom and walks over to Malia, covering her body with her shorter frame, giving some semblance of privacy.

"Any idea what made her shift?" Mrs. Martin asks.

"She's under a lot of pressure," Scott says. "School, her life after graduation."

"Her mom trying to kill her," Isaac adds.

Scott sighs. He shakes his head, breathes, "That shouldn't make her shift."

And he's right. Malia has come a long way since they first met her. She should have more control than that. It should take more to make her lose her humanity. She was doing so well for so long until, suddenly, she just wasn't anymore. Like, in a single week, something has shifted. Something's changed.

"Could it be connected to Stiles?" Scott questions. He looks over his

shoulder, towards Lydia and Malia.

“Hard to tell since we don’t know what a ‘stiles’ is,” Lydia answers.

“It’s a ‘he’,” Mrs. Martin says. Then, her eyes go wide, like she hadn’t meant to say that at all.

“Who?”

“Stiles,” she says, frowning, but knowing she won’t be able to cover up her slip. “It’s a Stilinski family nickname. Noah never used it, but, uh, his father did.”

—

It’s their first convincing lead, the first clue that feels like it could actually lead somewhere. Fortunately, Scott has a free period and there’s no harm in Lydia or Allison skipping class, so the three of them are able to pursue it right away. Meanwhile, Isaac gets tasked with staying back at the school with Malia – just in case she shifts again and to continue researching alternatives. (They can’t pin all their hopes on Stilinski, unfortunately.)

Before they leave, Isaac catches Scott’s wrist and pulls him aside. He says, “You need to be subtle, okay? Stilinski still doesn’t know about the supernatural and we have no idea how he would react if he found out.” Then, voice going a little teasing, Isaac adds, “Maybe let Lydia and Allison do the talking?”

Scott’s features break into a slightly amused grin. He nods, “Yeah, that’s probably for the best.”

Isaac returns the nod. He lets go of Scott’s wrist – hadn’t even really noticed he was still holding it.

“Call or text me if you find anything, yeah?” Scott asks.

“Yeah, of course.”

“And thanks for staying back,” Scott tacks on, like an afterthought, but fully genuine.

Isaac smiles at him, “Sure.” And, “Not a big fan of cops anyway.”

It’s a general statement, but they both know what he really means. He’s not a big fan of Stilinski. Unsurprising, considering the last time they properly interacted was when Isaac was wrongfully accused of

murdering his own father. And then, upon release, was promptly left to fend for himself with nobody helping him except his not-so-great alpha.

Honestly, Stilinski is lucky everything worked out as well as it did. And, looking at Scott with that slight smile and those brown eyes, Isaac knows he's pretty lucky too.

—

While Malia goes to finish her test, Isaac returns to the library. There, he finds the younger members of the pack talking in frantically hushed whispers, heads ducked low around a table.

Curious and a little concerned, Isaac approaches them. Liam is the first to take notice, werewolf ears metaphorically perking up. He spins his hand through the air, a pulling in and beckoning gesture.

Isaac quickens his pace, long legs crossing the library in a few strides. He grabs a chair from the neighboring table and drags it over with a slightly deafening scrape along the floor. It earns him a harsh glare from Liam, but Isaac ignores him in favor of asking, "What's going on?"

"We think there was another victim of the Ghost Riders," Mason says. Then, unnecessarily, he clarifies, "Like, someone new has been taken."

"Who?" Isaac asks, easily drawn into the development.

"You know Gwen? She's on the lacrosse team?" Hayden prompts.

Isaac nods. "Yeah." The lacrosse players are some of the only people whose names Isaac actually knows and recognizes.

"It's her twin sister, Phoebe." Hayden explains, "Gwen says she saw a man outside in their yard last night. And then, when she woke up this morning, Phoebe was gone and her room was empty. No one else remembers her either."

"Wait, she – she saw the Ghost Rider?" Isaac asks.

Hayden nods, grave and grim.

"Then, that means—"

"She's next," Liam fills in. "We know. We're... We're trying to figure out how to keep her safe."

—

When the bell rings, the younger pack members disperse while Isaac hangs back at the library, planning to spend his free period researching a nonsense word. Except, Corey doesn't leave.

He stays at his spot at the table, waving Mason on.

"Don't you have class?" Isaac asks, once they're the only two left in the library.

Corey shrugs, "I can be a few minutes late. My grades are already horrible."

Isaac frowns in a sympathetic sort of way. Then, "What's going on? Is something wrong?"

"Uh," Corey says. "Not – Not really. I just. I kinda heard through the grapevine that you're the person who's best at researching, and since Mason couldn't find anything..."

Corey's sentence trails off into nothing.

Isaac doesn't say anything, just looks at Corey expectantly, eyebrows raised and, hopefully, looking welcoming and approachable.

"I want to know more about what I am," Corey says, rushing the words out in a single breath. "It's just that I'm the only chimera left and I'm – I'm not like the others. I don't have claws or fangs. I just turn invisible, and, now, it seems like I'm somehow connected to the Wild–"

"Corey," Isaac interrupts. He keeps his voice even and calm. "Slow down."

Corey nods. His head bobs in a rapid and nervous way. Isaac really hopes Corey isn't scared *of* him.

"I just... I just want to know more about what *they* did to me," Corey says, a hint of venom laced in the words.

It's completely understandable. Corey was taken from his home and experimented on by mad scientists. Of course, he wants to know what was done to him. Of course, he wants to better understand the creature he's become.

Isaac can relate to that, to a certain extent. It's at least half the reason

he's become the person the pack relies on for research. He was curious about the world he was brought into, about the monster he was turned to. Because Derek might not have bitten Isaac without his consent, but he also definitely didn't lay out all the cards either.

This wonder of Corey's is understandable and valid. If anything, Isaac feels a little guilty that he hadn't considered this before, this avenue of research and this way of helping the younger teen. Still, he brushes off the blame because he knows it's unfounded.

Isaac wants to do anything he possibly can to help Corey. And so, he says, "I make no promises, but I'll do my best to find some answers. Okay?"

"Okay," Corey says. He smiles and it's so real and grateful. Isaac almost can't bear to face it.

He says, "Get to class."

Corey nods, picks up his bag, and ducks out of the library. Malia enters as he exits, passing Corey with an awkward, but friendly head nod of greeting.

She joins Isaac at his table, asking, "What did he want?"

"To learn more about what the Dread Doctors turned him into," Isaac says.

"Oh," Malia nods. "Yeah, that makes sense."

Isaac returns the nod.

For a while, things go quiet between them. Isaac doesn't ask Malia about the rest of her test, doesn't want to set her off or make her feel cornered. But, eventually, he does crack under the pressure and spills with, "You know, if you're having trouble with control again—"

Malia growls at him. It's a mostly human sound, but she still looks surprised to have made it. Isaac ignores the outburst in favor of continuing his suggestion.

"—Derek might be able to help you."

Malia rolls her eyes.

"No, seriously," Isaac says. "I mean, he wasn't much help when Scott was learning, but he's evolved. He had to spend a lot of time adjusting

to his full shift abilities and relearning control. I – I think he could help you.”

“Yeah, but why would he want to?” Malia says. There’s something small in her voice, something that almost sounds like insecurity.

Isaac doesn’t usually associate weakness with Malia. She’s always seemed so headstrong and sure of herself. But, then again, Derek carries those attributes too. Maybe it’s a Hale thing, presenting yourself like you have it all together, even if you’re crumbling underneath.

Isaac doesn’t comment on that, just says, “He was willing to help you try to kill your mother, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah, to protect Braeden,” Malia counters.

And that must be a Hale thing too, limited emotional intelligence and the firm belief that nobody could genuinely care about *you*. Isaac sighs. “Right, he got shot with five wolfsbane bullets just for Braeden.”

“Yes,” Malia says.

Isaac can’t tell if she’s being difficult on purpose, or if this is genuinely what she believes. Isaac doubles down on a second sigh, and says, “Okay, I’m gonna clue you in on a secret.”

Malia leans forward a little, unable to contain her curiosity.

Isaac pitches his voice into a whisper, “You might not see Derek as family, but... you’re his blood. That’s important to him.”

Malia scoffs. “So, he only cares about me because we’re related? That’s–”

“Silly, I know,” Isaac says, nodding. “But Derek comes from a family that was tight knit and a little weird and fiercely protective of each other. He doesn’t expect anything from you, but he’s going to look out for you. Because it’s what his mother would’ve done.”

It’s Malia’s turn to sigh. It’s almost... wistful.

—

After a long time spent mindlessly flipping through books, the bell rings and Isaac’s free period comes to an end. He and Malia exit out into the hallway, going to their lockers. It’s there that Scott returns to

meet them.

Malia doesn't look up from where she's putting her books away, just asks, "Stilinski said no, didn't he?"

"Yeah," Scott says, hands on his backpack straps and not looking at all discouraged by the information.

"But we're going anyway?" Isaac guesses.

"Yeah," Scott repeats.

"Or," Liam cuts in, "you could stay here and help me convince Gwen she's in danger."

"It's not your job to *convince* her," Scott says, leaning forward with the words just slightly. "It's your job to keep her safe."

"Just kidnap her," Malia says. Isaac doesn't miss the irony in the statement, the memory of Scott panic-kidnapping Liam. Though, the brief amusement quickly turns to a wave of confusion. Something about the memory is blurry and cut off. It feels stilted and hazy.

Isaac brushes the feeling aside in favor of following Scott without tripping over his own feet as they turn towards the exit. Scott looks over his shoulder at Liam, who's trailing after them, and pointedly says, "Do *not* kidnap her." Then, "We'll be back tonight after we talk to Stilinski's dad."

"Do we really have to do this?" Malia asks.

"He's our only lead," Scott says.

"Okay, what if the Ghost Riders show up?" Liam questions, redirecting their focus back over to his dilemma at hand.

"Then you'll handle it, Liam," Scott says. He stops walking to look at him head on, meeting him with gentle eyes and reassuring words. "And look, you're not alone. You've got Mason and Corey and Hayden. Okay? Just find a safe space for Gwen and keep her there."

"Any suggestions?" Liam asks.

"It doesn't matter," Scott says, "as long as she's safe."

It's something of a test, Isaac knows. To see how Liam performs without Scott around. It's a calculated risk to leave him on his own.

It's a big ask, but they all know Liam can handle it.

Then, Scott opens the blue door and disappears out into the school grounds. Malia turns to give Liam one last piece of advice, whispering, "Kidnap her."

Scott's voice carries into the hallway as he calls back, "Do not kidnap her!"

Isaac smiles at Liam, hopes it's reassuring, and says, "You really shouldn't kidnap her. Don't forget how angry you got when *Scott* kidnapped *you*."

Liam breaks into a smile. "Yeah, well, that was more about the non-consensual biting."

Malia scrunches up her nose in disgust. "Ew."

Isaac gives Liam an awkward thumbs up, and then they duck out of the school, following Scott towards the parking lot.

—

"I can't believe we're about to break into a nursing home," Scott says as the five of them approach the building.

Isaac can believe it. It sounds right up their alley, actually. The perfect blend of absurd and high-risk.

"After the orderlies at Eichen House, I'm pretty sure we can handle some nurses," Malia says.

And that definitely wasn't the point Scott was trying to make, made all the more evident by the way he gapes at her.

Malia takes the expression in stride. She turns on her heel, marching off ahead of them and pushing through the glass doors and into the building.

They really should have planned this out beforehand because Malia stomps right up to the receptionist, slams his face into the desk, and then drags his body towards the supply closet. All before the others have even made it up onto the sidewalk.

And, now, all four of them are gaping at her.

—

Isaac's starting to think that maybe they should have split up. Five people is quite a big group to be sneaking around a small nursing home. But none of them really want to divide and conquer, not with uncertainty in the air and the threat of *being erased from reality* hanging overhead.

Fortunately, it's not hard to find Elias Stilinski's room. And, an even bigger bonus: they don't have to attack any more nurses to get there unseen. They simply slip past the heavy wood of his door – the five of them, all together – easily breaking in.

Elias Stilinski is old, of course. He's sitting at a table and staring blankly ahead. The room is wrapped in warm sunshine and soft music coming from a speaker along the far wall. It sounds like jazz. Isaac doesn't necessarily hate it.

Elias hears them come in. He swivels in his chair. "Yes?" Then, "Oh. Is it time for my medicine?"

"We don't have your medicine," Malia says, arms crossed over her chest. She looks a little too combative for the situation, but Isaac knows it's just a result of the nervousness in her veins.

"Oh," the old man says, voice rough in that aged sort of way, turning more forward again.

"Are you Elias Stilinski?" Lydia asks. She's using a polite, careful tone. She sounds kind and gentle. (And it's not that Lydia isn't those things, she just has more range to her, more nuance. She's impressive in her social prowess. Or maybe Isaac just thinks that because he's so limited in his.)

"I am," Elias says.

Lydia gives a small smile, looking towards Scott with something a little bit like victory. Isaac can't help but think that it's probably premature. Still, Lydia approaches Elias, turning that winning smile onto him, and saying, "I'm Lydia Martin." And a little softer, "Do you know who I am?"

"Should I?" Elias asks. He's giving very little away. His voice is dull and plain. He doesn't seem all that interested in them, which sparks Isaac as a touch strange.

"Hey, Mr. Stilinski," Scott says, taking a few steps towards the table. He's smiling too, and it's so easy for him, to be so polite and so warm.

“We’re looking for somebody who *might* be named Stiles. You went by that name in the army, right?”

“Yes,” Elias says. “Best years of my life.”

Don’t think about Camden, don’t think about Camden, don’t think about—

“Do you know any of us?” Allison asks. Her voice is soft like Lydia’s, but with a hint of something more, something almost urgent or impatient.

“Of course I do,” Elias says.

Isaac sucks in a breath.

Elias looks up at Scott, asks rhetorically, “How could I forget my own son?”

Isaac can only see half of Scott’s face, but he sees the way his smile goes a little more forced, dropping just a smidge. “Your son?”

Scott looks to Lydia, turning to her for guidance and answers. It’s an instinctual movement, an ingrained habit of Lydia and her omnipresent knowledge. Lydia looks a little caught by the sudden attention, but she takes to it quickly.

“Mr. Stilinski,” she asks, “what year is it?”

“1976,” Elias says with no hesitation or pause. He continues, but Isaac is hardly listening to his mumble of, “It’s my son’s birthday next week.”

Lydia tips her head back and to the side, looking at Scott, unimpressed and unsurprised by the extent of their bad luck. She says, “He has dementia.”

Scott looks down at Elias. The old man looks up at him, and, again, he asks, “Is it time for my medicine?”

—

As soon as the realization is made clear, Isaac thinks they should leave. Stilinski didn’t want them coming here, and this must be why. He knew Elias wouldn’t be able to help them, even if he wanted to.

Isaac thinks they should cut their losses and go home before they get caught, but Scott and Lydia are determined. And Isaac doesn’t have

the heart to put word to his pessimism.

So, even as the sun sets, they stay and they keep trying.

“Scott McCall?” Elias repeats, sounding scandalized and incredulous.

Scott pulls a ridiculously endearing face. Isaac has half a mind to confess his love right then and there.

“No, no, no, no, no,” Elias mutters quietly. Then, a little louder, almost sounding excited by it, “You’re my *son*.”

“Keep it down, old guy,” Malia bites, stepping in front of Elias. She warns, “You’ll wake the other old people.”

Then, she starts to eat the peas from Elias’ dinner tray. They must be cold by now. It’s at least a little bit disgusting.

Elias looks over to Allison and Isaac, saying quietly, “I don’t like her.”

Isaac doesn’t laugh, but it’s a near thing. He only keeps it together because of the heat of Allison’s stare.

Lydia drops her bag and sits in the chair next to Elias. She gets a good look at him, making eye contact. “Your son,” she starts. “He’s the sheriff of Beacon Hills.”

“Sheriff?” Elias repeats. Lydia nods, but Elias doesn’t seem to notice, just starts a stuttering ramble of, “No, no, no. No, no. I – I was in the army.”

They’re not getting anywhere. Isaac’s just becoming increasingly uncomfortable.

“Use your claws, Scott,” Malia says.

Isaac has to hold back a flinch at the suggestion. He succeeds only by balling his hands into tight fists, blunt nails carving crescent moons into his palms. Isaac doesn’t know Elias, doesn’t particularly like him right now, but that doesn’t give them the right to dig around in his mind. It was barely okay when Isaac *consented* to having Peter in his thoughts and memories. They can’t rely on a skill so dangerous and violating.

“It could kill him,” Scott says, not looking at her, instead keeping his eyes on Elias.

“I get that, but we’re running out of time,” Malia counters.

Now, Scott does look her way. He’s disapproving and admonishing. (A distant part of Isaac feels flush and pleased at the sight of it. He can’t quite explain why, but he has a feeling he wouldn’t like himself very much if he could.)

Scott’s eyes flick to Isaac. Isaac knows he’s thinking about Corey, knows he’s thinking of the mistakes he made, the ones he can’t repeat. He shakes his head, almost a little frantic, “I *can’t*.”

Malia growls and flicks out her own claws. She’s taking a step towards Elias, impatient and fed up with Scott and his hero act.

“Hey,” Scott says at once, immediately grabbing Malia’s wrist and holding her back.

But it’s too late. Elias sees the claws and makes a startled sound like, “whoa,” grabbing the armrest of his chair.

And maybe Malia just doesn’t get it because she’s never been on the receiving end of the action, not like Isaac, not like Lydia.

Lydia, who is standing there with a face gone pale and eyes trained on Malia’s claws. Isaac takes a small step closer to her, feeling slightly protective despite the threat being aimed elsewhere, despite the fact that no harm seems to be coming her way.

“No,” Scott says, still holding Malia in place. “We’re not hurting him.”

Malia doesn’t put her claws away, but the tightness in her shoulders sags. She drops back enough that Scott knows she won’t lunge again, and, with that, he lets go.

“Young lady,” Elias says, addressing Malia, “you need to clip those nails.”

Isaac doesn’t laugh, but he does let his tension go slack. He exhales in relief and puts the distance back between him and Lydia and Malia.

—

As time goes on, Elias grows more agitated, becoming bothered by their presence in his room. “You,” he warns, “shouldn’t be here. If you don’t leave, I’ll have to report you.”

“Uh,” Scott sounds, mouth dropped open. The change in Elias’

demeanor has come on quick. He went from quiet and unemotional to lingering on the edge of an outburst, all in a matter of minutes. Scott asks, “What’s wrong with him?”

Lydia starts to shake her head, but then her eyes catch on the windows. She goes still and says, “The sun went down.”

“So?” Allison asks.

Elias starts mumbling unintelligibly, a swirl of messy syllables and disjointed fragments of words.

“He’s sundowning,” Lydia says, as if they should all know what that means. Clearly, none of them do except her. So, she explains, “It’s when dementia patients lose their faculties after the sun goes down.”

Elias’ breathing turns heavy and shallow. He complains, way too loud, “I don’t want to talk to you anymore!”

“So, what do we do?” Isaac asks. He keeps his eyes on Lydia. He’s not sure why, but he can’t handle watching Elias like this. It stirs something unsettled in his chest, something like... *pity*.

“We wait till the sun comes back up,” Lydia says with a small shrug of punctuation.

“We can’t wait that long,” Malia interjects, annoyed because Lydia knows that already.

Elias continues to grumble and protest, a mixture of grunting sounds and, “No, no, no.”

“There’s gotta be something we can do to keep him quiet,” Scott says.

Elias starts to cry out with, “Leave, leave, leave, leave, leave.”

Isaac squeezes his eyes shut for just a moment, just a brief second of relief against the onslaught of sound. Elias is desperate to get them out of his room. He doesn’t want them here, and yet they’re unrelenting. They’re subjecting this poor man to discomfort based on a whim, based on a family nickname.

“I can calm him down,” Malia says, hands held over her chest, taking a few steps forward.

Scott and Isaac both throw an open hand out in front of her, a signal of, *stop*. And, in sync, they say, “No.”

Lydia grabs a piece of paper. In a flurry of movement, she stands up and edges closer to Elias, sliding the paper down in front of him. "Elias. Look at the equations," she says. Again, "Look." And, "It's binomial probability. What's 'p'?"

Isaac watches on in stunned confusion.

Elias looks at the sheet of paper, at the letters and numbers and symbols. He says, "Um, probability of success?"

"Right," Lydia says, giving an emphatic nod with a tint of pride in her voice. "And that means $N - K$ is...?"

"Uh," Elias says, tapping the paper a few times. "Number of trials minus the number of successes."

Lydia gives a pleased, slightly forced chuckle.

"What's with the math?" Allison whispers the question, careful not to pull Elias out of the semi-calm state he's found.

"It helps dementia patients concentrate," Lydia whispers in answer, but quickly goes back to Elias. Allison looks over at Isaac with a confused sort of downturn to her lips. He only shrugs in response, watching as Lydia points to another equation, asking, "And this one?"

"That's, um," Elias leans forward, getting a better look at the page, "conditional probability."

They're all looking at Lydia in wonder and awe, but she doesn't pay them any mind. She grabs another sheet of notebook paper, saying, "Let's find... the moment of inertia."

Elias is on his feet now, holding a small stack of papers in his hands. He doesn't answer Lydia's question though. He stays quiet.

"Elias?" Lydia asks, looking up at him.

"That's Mr. Stilinski," he corrects. There's a sudden shift. Isaac can't explain what exactly changes, what exactly makes the moment tangible and real, but, whatever it is, Elias is more cognizant now. He shifts from the quiet old man to something more stable, more focused and present. "Just who the hell do you think you are?"

He looks around the group and Isaac knows they've all felt the turning of the tide. He knows what they're thinking: that they might just have

a chance, that they might just be able to get through to him.

Elias, the true version of him, is harsh and a little unforgiving. But he answers their questions and he understands what they're saying and who they are.

As proven when Lydia asks, "You know Scott isn't your son?"

"Of *course* I know that," Elias spits. He paces around the table, asking, "Are brains getting smaller with the skirts?"

Isaac shares a disgruntled look with Allison. Malia gives a soft growl.

"Malia, it's okay," Scott says, holding out a hand toward her. It's more gentle than it was before, more considerate and understanding, more a necessity than a protection or an alignment with Elias.

"So, you're that McCall kid," Elias says, looking down at Scott.

Scott twists to meet him more directly, his eyebrows quirk, "You know me?"

"I know your dad," Elias says. There's contempt in his voice. Isaac might have to readjust his opinion, might have to decide to volley in Elias' favor. "Couldn't hold his liquor and certainly couldn't keep that wedding ring on his finger. Pretty young thing would walk by and *poof*, that ring would disappear like magic."

Okay, yeah, never mind. It's settled. Isaac does not like him. He frowns at Scott, flashing him sympathetic eyes, like, *just ignore him*.

"Do you know all of us?" Lydia asks. Her hands are clasped together under her chin. She keeps her voice steady and diplomatic, neither approving or disapproving.

"Ey," Elias says, pointing at her, "You're Natalie Martin's girl. Am I right? You look like her. She was pretty once too."

Isaac feels anger crawling up his throat. And, by the looks of it, Malia is experiencing the same thing.

"Stop talking," she says, protective with eyes glowing blue, looking nearly purple in the low light of the room.

"Hey, Malia," Scott warns, stepping to his feet.

Elias ignores them both, still speaking to Lydia, “She also liked to talk like she was the smartest person in the room.”

Probably because she was, Isaac thinks.

Elias turns and his eyes land on Isaac. For a moment, Isaac’s terrified of what’s going to come out of his mouth. In the end, it’s so much worse than anything he could have ever expected or prepared for.

“And you’re Victor’s son. Camden.”

Isaac blanches. His breath catches in his lungs and he feels like he’s going to faint.

“Victor was a piece of work too,” Elias rambles. “Thought he was better than everyone, thought a trophy made him special.” Elias scoffs. “As if we don’t all know *exactly* why his wife left him.”

Isaac stumbles back a step.

It’s not Malia that lunges. It’s Scott. His eyes are glowing red and dangerous and threatening. There’s a snarl building in his throat and Isaac wants to call out to stop him, but he feels weak at the knees and dizzy.

Luckily, reinforcements arrive at the pivotal moment. Just then, the sheriff enters the room, barking, “Enough!”

Immediately, Scott falls back. He blinks the red from his eyes and looks a little freaked out, like he wasn’t in control for a moment, like he got lost in the anger of it all.

“Sheriff, w-we...” Scott stammers, but there’s no excuse to be given.

“I explicitly told you *not* to come here,” Sheriff Stilinski says. Isaac is trying very hard not to be terrified of him. (He’s failing miserably.) “And who attacked a staff member?”

The nurse behind Stilinski nods his head towards Malia, saying, “That’s her.”

There’s a low growl blooming at the back of Malia’s throat. Her jaw is clenched tight and her eyes are dark, but she doesn’t move and she doesn’t say anything.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Sheriff Stilinski asks. There’s less anger in his voice now, just something closer to disappointment.

Somehow, that's even worse.

Elias starts coming around the table, cajoling, "Noah... we were just having a nice conversation."

Stilinski takes one look at his father and hardens again. His eyes flicker with something familiar, something that Isaac has never seen outside of his own reflection, something he never expected to see in Sheriff Stilinski.

"The five of you. Out," Stilinski says. And, when no one immediately moves, he adds, "Now."

They quickly gather their things and make towards the door. No one protests and no one tries to put up a fight. They know there's no worming out of this one. They've gone a step too far to be written off or forgiven without some sort of hashing out.

"That's right!" Isaac hears Elias yelling after them. He's shouting, "Act like I'm *not* even here! Go crawling back to your *dead* wife and your *loser* son!"

Isaac's heart buckles in his chest. Skids, stutters, shakes. Shatters.

—

They're escorted to the station where they're greeted by Mrs. Martin and, to Isaac's horror, Derek. (Distantly, Isaac is a little surprised to note that neither Melissa nor Argent are here.)

Derek cuffs Isaac on the back of the head, not strong enough to hurt, but enough to pull a soft huff of surprise. Derek scolds, "You're supposed to tell me when you don't need a ride home."

And, yeah, that's true. Isaac flares with a spark of guilt just imagining how worried Derek must have been. He flashes an apologetic look, hoping to communicate his sorry through his eyes, but Derek's expression doesn't give or sway. He simply crosses his arms over his chest and juts out his chin, angling for Isaac to join the other four teens.

Isaac steps back between Allison and Scott.

"I know this looks bad," Scott is saying.

"It doesn't *look* bad, Scott," Mrs. Martin says. Anger flushes in her

tone, “It is bad.”

Scott drops his head, angling his eyes down and sighing, as if to say, *fair point*.

“You broke into a nursing home, you harassed a dementia patient, and you beat up a nurse!” Mrs. Martin rants out the list, conveying the severity of the situation and the extent of their blunder. “This could affect the rest of your lives!” Then, with a harsh point in her direction, “Especially you, Malia. They’re talking felony assault.”

Isaac has to clench his jaw to keep it from falling open. This is bad.

“I didn’t beat him up,” Malia says. She doesn’t even have the decency to pretend to be sheepish. “I could have, but I chose not to.”

“Believe it or not,” Lydia says, “that’s progress.”

Isaac’s not really listening. He’s more freaked out by the possibility of being in trouble with the law again. It sends him back into his sixteen year old self, the freezer and the jail, the constraint that never gives and never eases.

Isaac keeps hearing Elias’ voice in his head, saying that name, that sacred whisper of a dream Isaac had as a kid – a dream to grow up and be just like Camden. Except, Isaac only has one more year until he’s grown *past* Cam.

And he can’t stop thinking about that implication, that sneering tease of, *as if we don’t all know exactly why his wife left him*.

Isaac can’t be sure what that means, but he has a good feeling. It stings along his skin and aches in the bite of jaw.

Then, Sheriff Stilinski opens the door to the backroom. Poking his head in, he says, “By some miracle, the nurse decided to drop the charges.”

Isaac’s entire body sags with relief.

“They’re free to go.”

Mrs. Martin’s mouth is open in a half-formed, incredulous smile. She shakes her head, almost seeming disappointed by the turn of events. (Isaac knows it’s a temporary emotion, one petty and spiteful that will fade with time.) She looks at Lydia when she says, “Just because

you're not going to jail, doesn't mean you're not grounded for eternity."

Isaac looks at Derek, like he's waiting for a punishment or a lecture to be doled out. But Derek doesn't say anything. He simply shakes his head and gestures for Isaac to come with him.

So, Isaac does. He follows Derek out of the station, through the parking lot, and into the car. Here, Derek still doesn't say anything. Even as they get closer and closer to the loft, Derek stays silent. Isaac can't get a read on his chemosignals either. The entire thing is stifling and hot and terrible. The quiet closes in on Isaac like four pressing walls and—

"Are you angry with me?" Isaac blurts.

Derek glances over at him, for just a brief glimpse before returning his eyes to the road. For a split second, he looks surprised. Then, he sighs and says, "No."

Isaac frowns. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, Isaac," Derek says, sounding a little impatient. "I'm sure. I just – I wish you had kept me in the loop. Maybe then I could've talked you out of this absolutely ridiculous idea. I mean, seriously, talk about worst plans."

Isaac doesn't smile, but his frown fades, dwindling into something more neutral and blank.

—

It's not that Isaac thinks Derek is lying. It's just that he can't understand why Derek *wouldn't* be mad at him. Isaac did something horribly stupid and disregarded one of the only things Derek has ever asked of him. Derek should be fuming. He should be punishing or yelling. But he's not.

The loft is quiet and dark and Isaac's nerves are on fire. He's trying to ignore the gnawing feeling of guilt. He's trying not to make things worse than they already are, but the blame is eating him from the inside out. He feels on the edge of a cliff, one misstep from falling to certain death.

"Oh my god, Isaac," Derek complains, showing his first signs of annoyance since they reunited at the station. "Knock it off. You're

stinking up the entire loft. I told you: I'm not mad."

Isaac grumbles a little. He crosses his arms and tilts his head, asks, "Well, could you please tell that to your eyebrows?"

Derek scoffs and cracks a smile, enough so that his brows soften. Isaac feels his discomfort start to ease, just a little.

"Um," he says. "Why *aren't* you? Mad, I mean. You – You heard Mrs. Martin. She's grounding Lydia for eternity." Isaac feels silly to be asking such a question, to be dragging up a topic that Derek so clearly wants to avoid, but he just doesn't get it. He doesn't understand.

Derek sighs, "I'm not going to ground you, Isaac. I'm not your father."

Isaac flinches. He regrets it as soon as it happens, but he's worn down and tired and the words are completely unexpected.

Derek makes a sympathetic noise, closing some of the space between them. "Sorry, I – I shouldn't have said that. I meant... I meant *generally*. I'm not your parent. I'm not going to punish you. I did enough of that before and it always went horribly, didn't it? Isaac, I—" Derek shakes his head. "I trust you."

Isaac nods. His eyes feel a little wet. He whispers, "Yeah, okay."

"Okay," Derek repeats.

—

Scott calls just as Isaac is settling into bed. He's feeling less guilt ridden now, more safe and secure, enough so that he has to bite back a smile at the flashing of Scott's name. He rolls over in bed, answering with a softly spoken, "Hi."

"Hey, Isaac." Then, "*Is Derek mad?*"

Isaac isn't expecting the question, but he answers with an honest, and slightly humorous, "He says he isn't, but..."

"*The grumpy eyebrows?*" Scott fills in without missing a beat.

"Yes," Isaac laughs, unable to choke back the thrill of amusement. There's something warm settling in the pit of his stomach, something pleased at the way Scott knows not just Isaac, but Derek too. It turns to chuckles in his throat and he has to wait until the laughter dies down to ask, "What about you? Is your mom upset?"

“Uh, she’s actually not home yet. I think she’s with Argent?” (At the back of his mind, Isaac supplies it as the explanation for Argent’s own absence at the precinct.) *“So, now, I’m just waiting for both of them to show up and yell at me. Argent because I continue to corrupt his daughter. And my mom because... well, because we almost got arrested and Liam totally trashed my house while we were gone.”*

“Liam? What was he doing at your house?” Isaac asks. There’s a glimmer of amusement at the image of Argent busting down Scott’s door, but Isaac doesn’t think now is really the time to focus on that minor detail.

“His plan to protect Gwen included throwing a party at my house,” Scott says. *“Which I guess wasn’t the worst idea ‘cause of the mountain ash, but... it didn’t work. The Ghost Riders got past the ash and now I’m cleaning up for a party I didn’t even take part in.”*

Isaac hisses in sympathy, “Yikes,” Then, he thinks back to pages of books and explains, “The Ghost Riders ride the lightning. I’m not sure anywhere is safe.”

“Yeah.”

The line goes quiet for a bit. It’s not uncomfortable, but it is a little intense. They’re both thinking about what this could mean for their future safety, about how formidable the Ghost Riders are as a threat, about how seemingly unavoidable they are. Like, as soon as you’ve seen them, the taking is inevitable and unstoppable.

Or, at least, that’s what Isaac is thinking about. He assumed Scott was doing the same until he opens his mouth to say, *“Are you doing okay? You know, after what Elias said.”*

Isaac doesn’t answer directly, instead he reverses the question, “Are you doing okay? You’re the one who got the claws out.”

Scott sighs. It sounds too weary and world-bearing for Isaac’s liking. *“Yeah, sorry, I don’t know what came over me.”*

Isaac takes pity on him, returning to the initial question and saying, “I’m okay, honestly.” (He’s pretty sure it’s true.) “He’s just some old guy. Doesn’t really matter what he thinks... and I guess I do look a lot like Camden.”

He won’t for long. Maybe that’s a good thing. Maybe Isaac will be able to look in the mirror without that dull ache in his chest. Or maybe the

reminder will sting just as badly, maybe it will burn.

“Do you?” Scott asks, friendly and curious. *“I’ve never seen a picture of him.”*

That bothers Isaac. The fact that the first person he’s fallen in love with has never seen his brother.

“I’ll show you one sometime,” Isaac says. He readjusts his comforter, kicking it around with his feet for a few seconds. And, “He had this horrifically crooked smile that I *loved* – needed braces for more than two years to straighten it out. His nose was a little crooked too, I think he broke it diving in the pool one time. And he had the bluest eyes you’ve ever seen.”

Scott makes a hum of acknowledgement, like he’s listening.

“He kept his hair short. He always said it was ‘cause it made him a better swimmer, but I think he just thought it was cool. Which, honestly, it was,” Isaac says. He admits, a little quieter now, a little less animated, “That’s why you’ll never see me with short hair. Even if the zombie apocalypse comes and it becomes completely unmanageable, you won’t get near me with clippers. I’ll break your hand if you try.”

Scott gives a light chuckle, *“I think you’d look cool if you grew your hair out.”*

“Oh,” Isaac says. Because he’s an idiot. Because he’s already planning to throw his scissors out.

“I’m glad you’re not upset about it,” Scott says, circling back for a moment. *“I was worried.”*

“I think you worry too much,” Isaac says, even as his heart pounds in his chest. He likes how much Scott cares about him. It’s what drew him toward Scott in the first place, that genuine and unconditional caring.

“Sorry,” Scott says, but he doesn’t sound like he means it. *“I can’t help it.”*

Isaac’s not sure he can fault him for that. Not when he can’t help it either, when he can’t help being so hopelessly smitten for this boy. Isaac wants to bury his face into his pillow and scream.

Instead, he just smiles and says, “That’s okay. Somehow, I’ll find it in my heart to forgive you.”

Just as I’ve found it in my heart to love you.

Relics

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 4

Word count: 9,062

Those who see the Wild Hunt beware, for you are already lost.

Isaac sighs. He feels half a second away from slamming the book shut and throwing it across the room. It's all the same, every entry and every mention. It's just another under-researched, under-explored myth turned reality.

Isaac isn't getting anywhere. He's found nothing of help for Corey and even less for Stiles. (The name still feels strange in Isaac's mind. He tries to repeat it again and again – *Stiles, Stiles, Stiles* – but it remains foreign and unfamiliar.)

"Hey," Derek says, breaking Isaac out of his page. "I'm going to meet up with Argent. He asked for my help in tracking the killer that's been stealing pineal glands."

And that's the other thing: the Wild Hunt isn't their only problem. There's also this anonymous killer, who has started murdering people, seemingly at random, and taking their pineal gland. Isaac's done some research about that too. It's said to be the seat of the soul, a conduit to express our souls through physical action – whatever that means.

"Is Allison going?" Isaac asks, curious.

"Uh," Derek shrugs, "I don't know. Argent didn't mention her."

Isaac makes a face like, "oh," but simply nods and lets Derek go with promises to be careful. He says he'll be home before sunrise, but Isaac really hopes he's asleep before then. Or, at the very least, swept up in research that's actually helpful.

The Wild Hunt – an army not burdened with the weakness of ordinary soldiers. Ghost Riders do not need food and they do not grow tired. They are unstoppable warriors.

The description reminds Isaac of the oni, in a roundabout sort of way. Unstoppable, untireable, unreal. Born out of lightning instead of

shadows, controlled by forces that can not be understood or uncovered.

Isaac thinks of the oni and his mind strays to Allison, to her discovery of silver and the saving of the day.

It brings a smile to Isaac's lips, small and careful, just like the one he shared with Allison on that night. That split second of elation, of victory, of survival. That first moment when the arrow pierced armor and the unstoppable warrior became vulnerable, became defeated.

A longing swells up in Isaac's heart and he wants nothing more than to speak to her, to see that grin and those brown eyes. But... his mind goes blank. There's a void in his memory, a cavern that won't be filled no matter how hard he thinks or how carefully he combs through memories.

He can't think of where Allison would be.

Isaac scrubs a hand through his hair, giving a light tug to the mess of curls. He exhales a breath and pushes aside the nagging feeling in his chest and his throat. He takes the delay of his thoughts as a sign that he needs to stay here. He needs to focus, needs to keep his promise to Corey.

And so, Isaac returns to his reading.

—

Isaac reads about Woden, Gwyn ap Nudd, and Cain. He reads for hours about the Wild Hunt, and, though he feels as if he might understand it better now, none of it helps Corey or Stiles. It flares a feeling of *useless* in Isaac's lungs. Because even when he's researching, even when he's doing the one thing that's supposed to allow him to contribute, he still comes up short.

He's about to bash his head against the coffee table when the loft door opens.

Isaac doesn't hit his head against wood, but it does knock against the back of the couch as he jumps and startles. He hadn't heard movement in the hall before the creaking of metal, hadn't heard the alarm or noticed any misgivings.

Derek slides through the thin gap of the door, like he can't bear to open it any further. Isaac slumps against the cushions with relief and

ease, but then Derek steps closer and his back straightens again. Derek looks worn out and tired and he smells faintly of blood.

“Are you okay?” Isaac asks. He closes his book with a soft thud of sound, sliding it off his lap and onto the table before him.

“Yeah,” Derek says. Then, “It’s not my blood.”

He doesn’t elaborate and Isaac quickly realizes it’s going to be one of *those* nights. When he has to push a little harder for information, when Derek is sinking back into bad habits of isolation.

Isaac accepts the challenge, shifting directions to, “Is Argent okay?”

“Not his either,” Derek says. His voice is pitched low in his chest. He leans over to untie his shoelaces. Isaac finds minimal solace in the fact that he doesn’t wince or strain with the movement.

Isaac waits until the boots are off before allowing any impatience into his tone. He waits until Derek stands up, looking just a little lost, to say, “Okay. So, who’s blood is it?”

“Malia’s,” Derek says simply. He crosses the space to the living room in three long strides. Then, plops down into the comfort of the pillows and the familiarity of Isaac’s presence.

“Is she okay?” he asks. He’s pretty sure if Malia wasn’t okay, he would already know. He’s pretty sure if Malia wasn’t okay, then Derek would look more than just exhausted. But Isaac has to ask anyway, has to get the cursory questions out of the way.

“Yes.”

Isaac leans a little further into Derek’s space, allowing their arms to brush. (And that makes Isaac’s heart pound a little harder in his chest in a way that almost hurts, almost throbs. He can’t explain it, not even to himself.)

“What happened?” Isaac asks.

“She smelled the blood of the kill and it sent her into a frenzy. She lost control and was coming right at us, but,” Derek pauses, “Argent winged her.”

“Argent *shot* her?” Isaac exclaims, losing the touch against Derek as he turns to look at him, at the blank and unworried expression of his side

profile. And Isaac knows that means he must be overreacting just a little bit, volume just a notch too high, but when a former hunter shoots someone... *well*.

“Winged,” Derek restates, emphasis obvious. “Argent was very particular about the distinction.”

Isaac sighs, falling back into his seat and mumbling a breath of, “*okay*.”

Things go quiet between them after that. And Isaac knows that Derek would happily leave the conversation there for now, would gladly go to bed without another word. But he must know that Isaac isn’t finished. Because he stays firmly rooted to the couch and doesn’t interrupt or twitch or waver.

Isaac takes a handful of minutes to build up to it, to work up the courage to say, “You could help her, you know.”

“What?”

“You could help her,” Isaac repeats, despite knowing that Derek heard him perfectly the first time. He gives a little more detail in his suggestion, an explanation of, “She’s been struggling with control and I think you could help her.”

“Me?” Derek asks. There’s something small to his voice. He sounds almost scared. And, in typical Derek fashion, he brushes it off into harsh irony and a self-deprecating bite of, “Yeah. Because I’m the pinnacle of control.”

“Derek,” Isaac says. He turns his body again, turns to face the former alpha. He doesn’t speak again until Derek turns too, until he looks at Isaac and meets his serious expression and serious tone. “You’ve come a long way. You’re not the same person you used to be and you spent *months* adjusting to the full wolf shift.” Then, he restates, “I think you could help her.”

Derek makes a face at him, a twisting of his features that reads like, *oh, yeah, the same way I helped you?*

(Derek doesn’t say any of it out loud, giving Isaac no opportunity to respond. But if he did? If he did, Isaac would just say, *yes, like you helped me.*)

“Just—” Isaac pushes closer to the edge of the couch, like he’s getting

ready to stand. "Think about it?"

Derek nods.

Isaac smiles, and, "I'm going to bed. Good night."

"Night, Isaac."

—

The hallways are crowded as they often are at the start of the day. Isaac wants nothing more than to duck into his classroom and let his head drop down to his desk. He didn't get much sleep the night before. It was restless, his body tossing and turning for hours while his brain swirled with thoughts of the Wild Hunt, the Ghost Riders, pineal glands, and, for some reason, Allison.

So, now, instead of getting some momentary relief, Isaac is searching the busy halls for the girl stuck in his head.

He finds her standing at a locker. It's closed and she makes no moves to unlock it, merely leans back against the blue metal, seemingly observing the crowd. When her eyes cast over Isaac, they light with familiarity and she smiles, something bright and beautiful.

Isaac crosses the hall to get to her, returning her greeting smile and giving a quiet, "Hey."

"Good morning," Allison returns.

Isaac hesitates for a fraction of a second, but that's as much self control as he can muster. In the next blink, he's blurting, though still attempting to sound casual, "Did your dad talk to you about the pineal glands?" And, "Do you think he would know anything about the Hunt?"

For a blink and you'll miss it moment, Allison looks caught off guard. Her expression flits with uncertainty and worry, but then, just as quickly, her features are schooled and reset, turning to something blank and neutral. She answers, "He didn't get home last night till after I was asleep. But I can ask some other time, if you want."

Isaac nods and shrugs at the same time, deciding the explanation is understandable enough. After all, it was late when Derek got back to the loft, and, with Argent, there's no guarantee he went straight home either.

Just then, the duo are interrupted by the approach of Scott, Lydia, and Malia. Stupidly, Isaac glances down at Malia's leg. Obviously, there's no trace of last night's injury. She's perfectly healed by now.

Lydia holds up a library card, drawing the attention of the group and revealing an image and the name, *Jake Sullivan*.

"It's a relic."

Isaac spares a quick, sideways glance towards Scott. He gives an even briefer shrug.

"What's a relic?" Malia asks, speaking for the group and their collective confusion.

"An object with a fixed association to the past," Lydia explains, though it doesn't do much in helping them understand. Still, she continues, "Jake's ID was left behind after he was taken. And Gwen found her sister's bracelet on her bedroom floor."

"How can someone be erased and still leave something behind?" Allison asks. Her arms are crossed over her chest and her head is tipped to one side. Isaac can't tell if she's being genuinely curious and confused, or if she's dragging her feet in skepticism.

"A conservation of mass," Lydia says. Then, when she's met with blank faces all around, "The total mass of any isolated system remains constant."

Which, honestly, doesn't totally make sense to Isaac, but something in the words ring a bell in his memory. It reminds him of something Deaton once said, when the Beast was running rampant over Beacon Hills, when it was Mason they were trying to bring back. Voice low and hushed with intensity, Isaac recites, "Energy doesn't just disappear."

Scott looks at Isaac again, something sparkling in the brown of his eyes. "So, even the Ghost Riders have a weakness."

Malia takes the library card from Lydia. She turns it in her hand, reverent and considering. "A relic would be *proof* that Stiles *existed*."

Scott's mouth parts open. His eyes fall away from Isaac's, turning down and to the side. He says, quiet, as if afraid of a bubble bursting, "And maybe we can bring him back."

And so, they devise a plan of action. Allison and Lydia are going to talk to Stilinski and hopefully find a relic left behind by Stiles. Meanwhile, Isaac, Scott, and Malia are going to try to save those who were marked by Corey – everyone in attendance at the party meant to save Gwen.

Isaac asks, “And how are we going to do that?”

—

“We need to *hide* them.”

“We need to *fight* them.”

“We need to *hide* them.”

Liam and Mason are bickering back and forth, hunched over a library table and repeating their stances, locked in a never ending loop of argument. And it looks to Isaac like they’ve been at this for a while.

“Who’s ‘them’?” Scott asks, whispering as he leans forward against the table, palms pressing into wood and backpack riding up on his shoulders, just a little.

“The Ghost Riders,” Liam says, over eager and imploring.

Then, “The kids at the party,” comes from Mason.

It only takes Isaac a second to match the pieces of information with the pieces of the overheard conversation; Liam wants to fight the Ghost Riders while Mason wants to hide the kids from the party.

Scott squints for a moment, then his eyes widen and he nods, “Got it.”

“We could get a lightning rod,” Liam says, barreling ahead and explaining his idea with a sense of urgency. “Attract the Ghost Riders and catch them off guard.”

“*But* since everyone from the party is in danger,” Mason objects, “all we need to do is find a safe place to hide them until the storm passes.”

“The Ghost Riders ride the lightning,” Liam says, hand gesturing in a down and up motion as his neck tips forward in frustration, like he’s said this all before. Then, a little more slack and looking up at Scott, “Nowhere is safe.”

“It is, if we’re underground,” Mason says. He leans his weight a little

to the right, arguing more towards Scott than Isaac. It's what they're both doing, they're vying for Scott's approval. (And if Isaac's honest, he really doesn't mind. It's such a complicated dilemma and he has no clue which idea is the most reasonable, the most safe. He wouldn't want to be the one making the call, but he trusts Scott to make the right one.) "The earth can ground the lightning's electrical charge. *Everyone* would be safe."

"Okay..." Scott says slowly, moving to take a seat at the table. Isaac follows his lead and falls into the chair next to him. Scott ducks his chin like he's thinking, but the stalemate doesn't last long, just as his bag drops to the ground his eyes lift and he says, "Here's what we're going to do: we take everybody to the Argent bunker. It's underground." Liam makes a soft noise of irritation, causing Scott's next words to be directed towards him, an appeal of, "It's lined with mountain ash."

"We stopped the Ghost Riders at the party," Liam says, whispering his argument. He doesn't sound angry or frustrated. If anything, he sounds hurt. "We can do it again."

Isaac respects the confidence Liam has in them, but, sometimes, it's good to be cautious. Sometimes taking the biggest risk isn't the right choice. Especially when the lives on the line aren't necessarily their own. Better safe than sorry, and all that.

Scott blinks a little rapidly, giving a single jerk of his head. "You didn't stop them," he corrects. He's not harsh and he's not disapproving, he's just honest. He shrugs, "They just retreated. We don't know why."

Liam breaks eye contact. He looks down instead at the grainy wood of the table. His jaw is clenched and his hands are moving in tiny twitches of action. He gives the slightest shake of his head – disappointed.

Scott leans forward, tipping his head and trying to force their eyes back together, trying to re-tether the connection.

"Okay," Liam sighs. He gives in and looks up. He takes the defeat with grace, quickly climbing on board the new plan without a shred of resentment or bitterness, "How do we get everyone inside the bunker?"

Isaac sees relief in Scott's eyes at the compliance. He wants to share in it, but he's not sure he can. There's too much that's still unknown, too

much that's still at stake. He can only hope that they're doing the right thing, that they're making the right choice.

Upon exiting the library, Isaac and Scott are approached by Corey. Except, Isaac knows that Corey is here to talk to him specifically. Scott must know that too because he hesitates for only a moment, then turns to Isaac with a question in his eyes.

Isaac answers it with a smile, waving him on in a gesture of, *I've got this*.

Scott nods and returns the smile, turning to walk away while Isaac turns to Corey, "Hey. You okay?"

To be honest, Corey doesn't look it. He looks like he's barely slept. His eyes are sad and quiet, his shoulders are drawn tight and tense. He looks almost... tortured.

"Uh," Corey says. "I just... I feel like I really messed up?" It comes out almost like a question, a nervous hand scratching at the back of his neck. "Like, all these people are in danger now and it's my fault, and Liam already doesn't like or trust me, and I don't think Scott does either and I—"

"Corey," Isaac interrupts. He puts his hands on the younger boy's shoulders, a show of physical affection and a tamping down of the anxiety. He presses enough to be a comforting weight, enough that he feels it when Corey's muscles loosen. They don't go fully lax, but it's a start. One that allows Isaac to say, "Just breathe for a second. Yeah?"

"Yeah," Corey whispers. He gives a shaken nod and a shuddering exhale. His next inhale is quick and stilted, catching in the back of his throat, but Isaac doesn't judge and doesn't rush him. He merely applies a little more pressure to his shoulders, lets his thumbs push against the knots of his muscles. And, with every breath, Corey turns more even and steady. The shallowness begins to fade to something full body and deep – *anchored*.

"Okay," Isaac says, when he's confident Corey won't spiral into a panic. He still doesn't break contact, though. He keeps his hands on his shoulders, kneading at the tension, slight and subtle enough to be brushed off if questioned. "Listen to me: you were just trying to help."

Corey gives another sad nod. His eyes look a little wet, but it could

just be the glint of the fluorescent lights. The wetness in his voice is a little harder to explain away, a thickness to his words as he says, “I just thought it’d be easier to survive and fight if everyone could see the Ghost Riders. I didn’t realize that would make them targets.”

He sounds so genuinely broken up about it. His guilt is palpable and potent, enclosing him and Isaac in a shrouded corner of the hallway, a blame stricken atmosphere.

Isaac nods and drops his hands to his sides, “I know.” Then, “Scott knows that too, okay? I get that you and Scott got off to a rocky start and you maybe have a different perception of him than most people, but Scott is *good*. He doesn’t... He doesn’t really hold grudges.”

Meaning: he definitely trusts Corey now and probably likes him too.

“And what if I do?” Corey asks. He clarifies, “Hold grudges, I mean.”

Isaac knows the question is more hypothetical than anything. He knows Corey doesn’t hold the claw incident against Scott. Maybe he did at first, but then, when Mason was taken by the Dread Doctors, Corey’s perspective shifted. He realized the position Scott was in at the time and the fear he held for Liam. Corey recognized and empathized with it, understood it, *related* to it.

Still, Isaac answers with honesty and sincerity, “Then Scott will be patient.”

“And Liam?” Corey asks.

Isaac gives a soft sigh, nearly an exhalation of humorless laughter. He shrugs slightly, says, “I don’t know. Liam is more complicated, but... if you just keep showing how much you care about Mason, then he’ll come around. I mean, it seems like he’s already started to, right?”

Corey nods. “Right.” He still doesn’t look relieved. He still looks terrified.

“Look,” Isaac says gently. “You don’t have to worry, okay? Scott has a plan. He’s – He’s going to save them.” Then, “He always does.”

Corey looks at Isaac with an expression that can only be described as *knowing*. Isaac pointedly ignores it, claps Corey on the shoulder, and makes a quicker exit than he probably should.

Scott has to strain to close the door of the bunker. It's a heavy metal that grinds on its hinges and echoes when it shuts.

And, yeah, Isaac definitely wouldn't survive a zombie apocalypse down here. The space is cool and dark and feels a little damp, for some reason. It doesn't help that it's currently crowded with people – everyone from the party plus Argent, Derek, Scott, and Isaac.

"I wouldn't touch that," Argent says. His voice pulls Isaac attention and gives him a place to ground his focus.

The guy touches it anyway. He presses the button and the taser goes off. He could've seriously hurt someone with that. *Idiot*.

"What's all this for?" the guy asks.

"Your protection," Argent answers, vague and intimidating. Isaac watches the kid watch Argent. There's a worried glint in his eyes, something nervous and uncertain. Isaac can't fight his smirk. (He knows they're supposed to be helping save these people, but just because Isaac doesn't want them dead, doesn't mean he has to like them.)

"Hey, we're missing three plus Gwen," Liam whispers with something harsh in his words, something akin to fear. Isaac's smirk falls away.

Scott looks down at the list of partygoers and then around at the room. He sweeps his eyes over each person and Isaac knows he could call them all by name. It's an impressive skill, but Scott wouldn't see it that way. He'd shrug like it's the most normal thing in the world, like it's not a demonstration of the level of care and compassion he holds. It warms Isaac's heart just to think about it.

"They're all the lacrosse players," Scott announces to their little circle.

"They were at the party, so they know what's coming," Corey says. Isaac doesn't know exactly what his intentions or implications are, but there's something like deflection in the words, as if he's trying to redirect the blame. (Nobody blames Corey anyway, is the thing. They already went over that together, though Isaac isn't surprised that it didn't exactly stick. If he was in Corey's position, he'd be beating himself up too.)

Argent interjects with, "People see what they want to see."

Meaning: they might have been at the party, they might have seen the

Ghost Rider, but that doesn't mean anything. That doesn't mean they believe, that doesn't mean they know to be careful. It just means they're at risk, nothing more and nothing less.

"Guys," Mason says, drawing in the attention of the group. "We're running out of time."

He holds up his phone, revealing the K-index – a scale that meteorologists use to measure thunderstorm activity. Mason had told them all about it, about how they could potentially use the numbers to track the Ghost Riders. He had said that a K-index value less than twenty means no activity while anything above thirty-five is severe.

Mason's phone is lit with a bold and red: **35**. And it's steadily climbing too. They all watch as the number ticks up and up. Thirty-seven, thirty-nine, forty.

"Scott," Liam whispers, "we have to get them."

"I'll go," Scott says, like a self-sacrificing idiot. And, even worse, "The rest of you stay here."

Yeah, no.

"We couldn't fight off *one* Ghost Rider," Liam objects so Isaac doesn't have to. He speaks with conviction and worry laced in every word, "Who knows how many are gonna be there tonight? We're going with you."

"You're marked." Scott says it like a warning.

"So am I," Mason says.

"Yeah, me too, but at least I can see them coming," Corey reasons.

Scott pauses. He looks over at Isaac, a question mark swimming in the brown of his eyes. It's his way of silently asking Isaac for his opinion. It's his way of checking in and making sure not to steamroll him. It's a sweet gesture. One Isaac answers with something he knows Scott won't like, a declaration of, "You're not going out there without me."

Scott sighs. The question fades from his eyes, replaced with something pleading and a little scared. It's like he's begging Isaac to stay put, to stay somewhere safe. It splits Isaac's instincts in two. One half desperate to listen and comply, the other half desperate to protect and guard.

The second half wins out and Isaac defends himself with, “I’m *not* marked. I’m not a target.”

Scott drops his head. His eyes go empty of any emotion, turning only dark and considering. Then, “All right.” He turns to the younger members of the pack, towards Corey most all, and says, “But if you see them coming... *run*.”

Isaac looks across the room at Derek. Their eyes lock in easy contact, the kind of familiarity that makes finding each other in a crowded room the easiest thing in the world. Derek meets Isaac with a nod that means, *good luck*. Or maybe it’s more like, *I’ve got this covered, don’t worry*. And Isaac knows that it’s true, knows that Derek can hold down the fort – literally and figuratively.

So, he nods back and joins Scott as he wrenches the heavy door open once more.

—

And so, the six of them race back to the high school where Hayden goes to the girls’ locker room to try to convince Gwen to come to the bunker while the rest of the group goes to the boys’.

They rush down the steps, Liam asking, “What’s the plan?”

“Convince Okafur, Steinbach, and Wallace that playing tonight is a bad idea,” Scott says, listing off the names with easy confidence.

Then, Scott suddenly stops. Just before the entrance to the locker room, he turns to face the group, looking right at Mason and Isaac. “You two have read everything there is to know about the Ghost Riders.”

It’s not really a question, though Mason answers as if it is, a breath of, “Yeah.”

“And you’re the only ones of us that have figured anything out,” Scott adds. His intensity is rising. Something desperate finds his voice and floods his tone, something seeking and imploring. “Have you come across *anything* that could stop them?”

“Not yet,” Mason says, then looks over at Isaac, for his input and his answer.

Isaac shakes his head, “No.” But then, he stares at Scott and feels a

flutter of hope in his stomach, just shy of butterflies. “But we could try.”

“Do that,” Scott says with a nod and a flush of gratitude.

Then, Scott, Corey, and Liam duck into the locker room, leaving Isaac and Mason standing out in the hallway. The younger of the two is mumbling under his breath, nervous energy radiating off of him as he whispers self-encouragement.

Isaac smiles at the endearing act and says, “We can do this.”

Mason looks up from the floor, lets their eyes meet and floods with his usual shine of enthusiasm. He starts nodding rapidly, saying, “Okay, okay. Yeah.” Then, “Where do we start?”

“Well, I’ve never actually seen one of the Ghost Riders, so I think we need to combine your practical knowledge with my book knowledge,” Isaac starts. There’s an idea forming in the back of his mind, a game plan and a way to go about this, but it all dies on his tongue and trails off into nothing.

The hallway goes thick with lacrosse players, all wearing their jerseys and headed out onto the field. Isaac spots three familiar numbers. The numbers of Okafur, Steinbach, and Wallace.

They were too late. They’re going to have to play the game.

And, as if on cue, Scott’s voice calls from the locker room, “Isaac?”

Isaac pivots towards the open doorway, then stops himself from rushing in too quickly. He whirls back to Mason, categorically ignoring the alarm and panic in his eyes. He gives Mason what he hopes is a reassuring smile and starts walking backwards, saying, “Figure something out, okay?” Then, “You can do this. I believe in you.”

Mason looks like he’s going to puke. Isaac’s just glad he can’t hear the lie in his heartbeat.

—

The night is dark, but lit with stadium lights that feel so entirely out of place. Isaac wasn’t expecting to be playing a lacrosse game this evening, but, then again, their supernatural disasters do have the tendency to take over the field.

"I'll take Steinbach," Scott says. To Isaac, "You take Wallace." To Liam, "You're on Gwen." And, lastly to Corey, "You're on Okafur."

"What if I see Ghost Riders?" Corey asks. There's a nervous restlessness to his frame, a bouncing on his heels and flicking of his eyes in every direction.

"Yell," Liam says with very little patience or compassion. (Isaac has half a mind to hit him in the back of the head, but he keeps his hands to himself. Mostly because he's already put his gloves on and the impact would be dull at best.)

"And then get ready to fight," Scott tacks on.

Corey looks, understandably, terrified. It's his first semester on the team and his first semester fully roped into the pack. It's an overwhelming adjustment. But, before Isaac can give him any comfort or advice, the ref blows his whistle and they all run off onto the field.

They're paired up for the protection of the partygoers, and, while it will keep them safe, it doesn't align well with the act of actually playing lacrosse. Their straying focus and overcrowded positions cause chaos in the actual game.

Isaac usually plays on defense, but, now, he's invading Wallace's space in offense. It gets him multiple annoyed glares and a stick thrown out against his middle. Isaac gives a soft *oof!* at the impact.

"Can you back off?" Wallace snaps.

Isaac simply throws his arms out in a smug sort of gesture, a shrugging smirk and a silent, *what can you do?*

Wallace looks like he wants to shove Isaac or maybe flip him off. Fortunately, the gaze of the referees and the padding of the gloves keep him from doing either. He can't do much more than huff and try to evade Isaac in the next play. (Which, of course, doesn't work. Isaac is a werewolf with super-speed and determination. But he applauds the effort, truly.)

As they set for another play, Isaac observes the rest of the field. Predictably, he finds that the others aren't doing much better. Corey gets checked by Okafur and lands splayed out on the ground. Scott repeatedly misses near-open shots in the swirls of distraction. And Liam is struggling to keep close to Gwen, who is easily the most combative and sprints away from him at every chance.

It's all a complete mess. They're down 3-0 before the game has even really begun. Coach's face is bright with anger as he shouts, bellowing over the field, "What are you doing out there? I am going to *kill* the four of you!"

Isaac shoots him a sheepish grin. This really is a disaster.

And yet, the game continues. Kind of.

Aggression is building everywhere. Players from opposing teams clash and argue and fight. The refs are trying to keep everyone in line, but it's impossible to contain the rampant energy and the growing anger. It's a different kind of a mess now, less fumbling and funny and more foreboding and fearful.

"What's gotten into everyone?" Isaac asks Scott as they both pull their helmets off. They watch Liam shove and push at one of the purple jerseyed players, showing a lack of control that they haven't seen from him in months.

Scott looks around the field, taking in the disarray at every turn. "What if it's the Wild Hunt?" he asks. "What if it's affecting everyone?"

Right on cue, thunder rumbles over ahead. Isaac tries not to flinch at the ominous, growling sound, the booming force of nature itself. Wind ripples through the stands and across the field, stirring blades of grass at their feet and bringing a chill to Isaac's skin. With the wind, comes a surge in the fraught tug of war and swirling tension.

"I have to go stop Liam," Scott says, gesturing to where the shoving match has become something worse, something close to fists flying.

Isaac nods, even as his heart begs to keep Scott close. He ignores the ache of his pulse and lets Scott run off, lets him leave Isaac standing there.

Though Isaac isn't alone for long. Mason, misguided as the decision might be, runs directly onto the field. Isaac makes wide eyes at him, urgently ushering them back towards the sidelines, where it's less frantic, where there's at least some facade of safety.

"It's Parrish," Mason blurts. And even through the grumbling thunder and the hectic state of the field, Isaac can hear his heart pounding in

his chest. His breathing is ragged and quick. He's worked up and ready, adrenaline pouring in and around him.

"What?"

"It's Parrish," Mason repeats. "He's the reason the Ghost Rider left the party. You need to call him." Then, turning grave and less excitable, "Call Parrish. Tell him he needs to meet us at the school."

Isaac doesn't doubt Mason for a single second. There's no reason to. Even if it's just a hunch, even if it's not exactly right, it's still the best lead they've got. And so, he jumps into action, running to get to his lacrosse bag, to retrieve his phone from within its depths. He tears off his gloves and rifles through clothing and gear until he gets a grip on his phone. Then, he dials.

It rings for a good fifteen seconds, drawing a frantic, "Come on, Jordan. Pick up, pick up," from Isaac's lips.

"Isaac?"

He expels a huge breath of relief. "Jordan," he greets, nearly smiles. He doesn't hesitate in getting to the point, rushing with, "You need to come to the school. The Ghost Riders are coming and we need your help." His voice pitches a little softer, a little more unfeigned, "Please."

"Okay," Parrish says. "*Okay, I'm on my way.*"

Isaac thanks him and hangs up, throwing his phone back into his bag and closing it shut again.

Things are really picking up now. Isaac can feel it in the air. He can feel the rippling currents of energy, like a spark of static, a buzzing of electricity.

He looks out onto the field and sees the chaos rising. He can barely see anything at all, but he sees *something*. It's just a rush of players and a rustling of the wind, but Isaac *knows* there's more. There's more that he's blind to, more that he's not quite privy to yet.

But Isaac doesn't unleash. For a moment, he stands caught. Between the sidelines and the field, between Mason and the lacrosse players – Mason and Scott.

But then, Hayden sprint over. She slides to a stop beside them,

dragging up dirt and grass with the heels of her boots. “Go help the others,” she says to Isaac. “I’ll stay with Mason.”

I’ll protect him, she means.

Isaac doesn’t know Hayden well. He doesn’t know what she’s capable of. He doesn’t know if she actually can keep Mason safe, if she can assure his survival as well as Isaac could.

It brings a pause to his feet and a stall to his movement, but Mason’s voice comes quick and urgent, a call of, “Isaac, go.”

And so, he does.

—

Isaac runs back out onto the field just as it begins to rain. It’s an immediate downpour, thick and heavy and hard to see through, though that hardly matters when their adversaries are already invisible to most.

Isaac rejoins Scott, Corey, and Liam, the last of them shouting, “The Ghost Riders are here!”

Isaac believes him easily – can feel the added heat in the air, the distinct sensation of being watched – but he still can’t see them. Even if the sky was clear and the sun was high in the sky, Isaac wouldn’t be able to see the villains on horseback.

The group quickly unites at the center of the field, gathering around the marked partygoers as the Ghost Riders draw closer. There’s a frantic, grappling commotion, hands reaching for arms and tugging in and keeping near. It’s a wet and hazy mess of limbs and desperation.

“Okay, we got all three, right?” Scott shouts over the thunder, the rain, and the distant yelling of the bleachers.

“Scott,” Liam says, shaking his head, pulling his attention. “There were four.”

Scott’s face is lit by a flash of lightning, painting him with white light and an expression of pure terror.

Scott grabs Corey’s hand, bringing the Ghost Riders into view. Isaac doesn’t stop to think it through, doesn’t consider the consequences or the repercussions, just snatches Scott’s hand in his own. And it really

shouldn't work, but, somehow, it does. The link passes from Corey to Scott and into Isaac, connecting them.

As soon as their skin meets, as soon as their hands clasp, the Ghost Riders come into view. There's a blinding green light and a man on horseback. The storm still rages and the dark still prevails, meaning Isaac has to glow his eyes to see clearly. When he does, he finds a man in a thick leather coat and a matching hat. He finds eyes hollowed out and skin stripped of life. He finds hooves meeting grass and...

And dragged behind the Rider, wound up in a lasso, is a screaming, yelling, *crying* lacrosse player. He's dragged mercilessly along, back sliding against wet ground at a pace that can't be comfortable.

Then, there's an explosion of green smoke and the player disappears.

—

"Oh my god, they're real!" Okafur exclaims, ripping off his helmet. "We gotta get out of here!"

Liam throws an arm out, keeping anyone from running off. He yells back, "Stay together, we'll protect you!"

"How?" Gwen shouts.

And that's a good question. Because Isaac has no idea how they're supposed to fight these things, how they're supposed to stop people from being taken. He only hopes that Mason is right about Parrish, only hopes that Parrish is hurrying.

Unfortunately, there's no swooping in yet. There's no one saving the day. There's just the four of them surrounding three vulnerable students, all dripping wet in lacrosse gear that sticks to their skin and muddles their movements. There's just the seven of them.

And the three Ghost Riders coming right towards them.

"Run!"

Scott roars the demand, but it doesn't matter. As they turn as a group, they're met with more Ghost Riders on their other side. The spinning threatens to pull Isaac's fingers free from Corey's. It's a wet slide of damp skin, but Isaac squeezes a little tighter. He doesn't want to lose sight of the threat, doesn't want to have to fight them blind.

“Stay close!” Liam yells.

They circle in tight, backs towards each other and facing out at the Ghost Riders. They’re trying to cover their bases, but it’s mostly useless. They’re completely surrounded by horses and their riders.

They’re trapped.

One of the Ghost Riders holds out its gun. The Rider takes aim and shoots, nailing the target with ease, but there’s no blood and there’s no body. Okafur explodes just as Steinbach had, turning to green smoke and disappearing in a gust of wind. One second he’s there, and he’s gone the next.

And, in the moment of panic that follows, Corey lets go of Scott and Isaac.

Isaac loses sight of the Ghost Riders. There’s no green smoke or fading of view. They just vanish. He goes blind to the horses and the gunmen. They clear from his vision, leaving Isaac stumbling around in the dark, lost and confused.

“I can still see them!” Scott yells.

“I can’t,” Isaac calls back, volume a little stunted, a little anxious, a lot terrified.

Scott has marked himself. He’s made himself a target, but it hardly matters in this moment. Right now, all that matters is the current dilemma, the current fight, the current threat.

Isaac can’t see what’s happening, but he sees Liam shine his eyes and drop his fangs. Then, he lunges. He jumps at something Isaac can’t see, at open air that Isaac assumes is a Rider. He tumbles to the ground and attacks against an invisible force.

“Liam!” Scott shouts, a reactionary release of fear and worry.

Liam slams fist after fist, claw after claw, but nothing happens. At least, nothing that Isaac can see. He sees fists and claws stopping inches above the ground, like they’re slamming against a forcefield, like they’re connecting with a barrier unseen.

Nothing happens until, suddenly, Liam is tossed to the side. He flies through the air like he’s being pulled on a wire. Isaac braces himself for green smoke, but it never comes and Liam stays in sharp contrast

and firm saturation. He doesn't disappear, but he does fumble up to his feet.

Isaac's attention is pulled elsewhere as a shot fires through the air. Isaac can't see the Riders, but he can hear the bullet erupting from the muzzle of a gun. This time, it's Wallace that gets taken.

"We can't stop 'em!" Liam slurs through sprouted fangs as they circle the last remaining partygoer.

Scott shouts back with red glowing eyes, ordering them to, "Protect Gwen!"

But, in the end, there's nothing they can do. Isaac watches as Gwen stands off against an invisible opponent, watches as she surges to attack. He watches Scott jumping forward, trying to get between her and the enemy. He hears his drowned out cry of, "No!"

And then, the Rider shoots. The bullet connects with Gwen and she vanishes in a cloud of green.

Isaac doesn't see them disappear, but he feels the air settle. The wind stops rushing around them, stops swirling. And he knows without seeing that the Ghost Riders are gone.

The four of them are left standing on an empty field, in the pouring rain, with nothing to show for their efforts, with nothing but soaking uniforms and an aching feeling of *failure*.

—

The younger pack members run off to find Mason and Hayden, meanwhile Isaac and Scott head towards the locker room. Though, as they're just about to go inside, Isaac's phone rings.

The caller ID reads with: **Derek**. So, of course, Isaac answers right away, "Hello?"

"Hey," Derek says. Isaac can't quite place the tone of his voice. There's too much static, too much white noise to peel apart the layers of emotion. All Isaac knows is that Derek's alive and he's here, in this world and not taken. That has to count towards something, that has to allow him some relief.

Still, Isaac doesn't express it outwardly. Just asks, "What happened?"

"The Ghost Riders..." Derek begins, sounding almost like he's whispering. *"They – They took everyone. Everyone in the bunker. And... Argent got hurt. Malia and I are here at the hospital with him, but maybe you and Scott should come?"*

Isaac looks over at the boy in question, knows he's been listening to the conversation even though Isaac's phone isn't on speaker. (He doesn't mind in the slightest. He would've made it known if the conversation was meant to be private, would have walked away or something. Instead, he stayed glued close to Scott's side.)

Scott meets his eyes and gives a nod of approval.

"Yeah," Isaac says. "We'll be there soon." Then, to keep Derek informed, "Things went just as badly here. We weren't able to save anyone."

The line goes quiet. For a moment, Isaac thinks Derek hung up on him, but he can still hear the telltale crackle of connection. So, he waits.

Scott is staring at him with furrowed brows, but Isaac simply shakes his head, simply lets the silence hang between them.

It lasts a good twenty seconds before Derek finally cracks and whispers, *"We'll figure this out. We always do."*

It's startlingly similar to the reassurance Isaac had given Corey earlier. He feels bad now, looking back at that moment with hindsight on his side, with the knowledge of everything that went wrong. He makes a note to himself to check on Corey later, to make sure he's okay, to diffuse the more than probable fault he's feeling.

To Derek, Isaac just says, "I know," but even that sounds feeble and false to his ears.

There's another pause, another breath from Derek, and then the line actually does disconnect. As usual, there's no goodbye. And, as usual, Isaac is glad for it.

Then, just as the call comes to a close, the younger packer members turn the corner. Liam has his arm wrapped around Hayden, but Isaac can't tell if that's because she's injured or if they're just clingy. Mason and Corey are with them too, walking close enough that their hands brush with every step, but neither looks particularly harmed. Regardless of appearances, it's immediately obvious that the Parrish

plan didn't work. It's apparent in the negative energy of the group, the dull atmosphere of the hallway.

Still, Isaac doesn't lose all hope yet. If there's one thing Isaac's research made clear, it's the link between the hellhound and the Wild Hunt. They're a package deal. Mason might not have put all the pieces together correctly, but there's something here. There's something more, something they've simply misread.

"Everyone from the bunker's been taken," Scott informs them. There's a hint of apology in his voice, a touch of grief, but Isaac's pretty sure he's the only one that picks up on it. He's pretty sure he's the only one that's studied Scott's voice to know every shade and every inflection.

"Everyone?" Mason echoes. He shakes his head, mouth dropped open. "How?"

"It doesn't matter," Liam grumbles. There's an angry edge to his words. Something like blame.

"Malia and Derek are at the hospital. Argent's been hurt," Scott says. He gestures behind them, towards the double doors. He doesn't explicitly state that he and Isaac are going there, but the implication is clear as day.

They make it half a step down the hall before Liam interrupts, stopping them with a call of, "Scott?"

Scott turns those compassionate eyebrows on Liam, pulled together in soft confusion and concern.

"Tonight..." Liam starts, but doesn't finish. It's like he can't, like he can't bring himself to say the words, but he doesn't have to. They all know what he's getting at. The blame in his voice wasn't directed at Scott, it's directed at himself.

"No, hey," Scott says quickly, taking a step back towards Liam. He shakes his head, "It's not your fault." And, *of course*, he says, "It's mine. We should've done both. Defend the bunker and use a lightning rod."

Liam falls back a step in shock, in disbelief, in disagreement.

"It would've given us a better chance," Scott says.

Then, he turns to leave and Isaac follows. This time, Liam lets them

—

As the pair walks into the hospital, before they join the others, Isaac brings it up again. He can't leave it the way it is, messy and wrinkled and wrong. So, softly, he says, "It's not your fault either."

Scott doesn't stop in his tracks and he doesn't turn to look at Isaac, but he can still sense the hesitation in him. He can feel Scott withdraw. He can feel him pull back, in that same combination of shock, disbelief, and disagreement.

"It's not," Isaac says again. His voice is still quiet and gentle, but there's an iron weight underneath, the strength of his conviction. "We did everything we could. We did what we thought was right with the information we had. No one faults you for that."

Scott opens his mouth to protest, but no words come out. He sighs and runs a hand through his still wet hair. They walk a few more feet before Scott says anything. The others come into sight, but they're still a good distance away, there's still some semblance of privacy for Scott to speak into, a mumbling of, "I'm just tired of this feeling."

Isaac nods. He hears the layers of sympathy and something close to adoration in his tone of, "I know." He swallows. He wants to say more, but he's not sure how to articulate it. He doesn't know what to say that won't come out shallow and cliché. The best he can come up with is, "I'm tired too."

And Scott does look at him now. His eyes are kind and warm despite the chill of the rain and the night's events. His mouth twists in something sympathetic. Understanding passes between them like a mutual hurt. The feeling doesn't fade, but it eases under the influence of, *not alone*.

Isaac half expects Scott to pull him into a hug, but they just keep walking until they reach the others.

Melissa is wheeling Argent on a hospital bed with Malia and Derek close behind her. Derek looks a little roughed up around the edges, has blood drying along his temple, but he's okay. He's here and he's alive and he smiles faintly when Isaac comes into view.

"Is he okay?" Scott asks Melissa.

“He has blunt force trauma to his temporal bone, three broken ribs, and multiple surface level lacerations,” Melissa lists. None of it sounds very good. It sounds like fragile and uncertain. Regardless, Melissa looks over her shoulder at Scott, tipping her voice low with, “Which seem to be from... whip marks?”

Argent’s face is contorted in pain and discomfort. His neck turns from side to side, like he’s writhing with it, but can’t handle more motion than that.

“What he needs is a lot of rest,” Melissa says. It’s an oversimplification, Isaac knows. It’s a grand sweeping gesture of, *sleep will heal him*. And they know it’s not true, but nobody protests and everybody holds on tight to the thought, to the hope buried deep.

Lydia’s heels click against the vinyl floor of the hospital. As she joins them, she asks, “What happened?”

They don’t answer right away. Upon her arrival, they allow Melissa to push Argent’s bed into a hospital room. Isaac, Scott, and Malia step out of the way and into a more open and quiet space of the neighboring and vacant hallway.

“The Ghost Riders took everyone,” Malia says, despondent and pessimistic in a way that’s more realism than anything else right now. “We barely slowed them down.”

“Tell us you found something,” Scott says. His tone is blank and monotone, but his words are almost begging. There’s a hint of something more beneath the surface, something clawing and desperate.

Lydia gives a slight shake of her head. “I didn’t find anything. There was no relic.” And, “I even looked up Claudia – Stilinski’s wife who died in 2004. She never had kids, so... Stiles can’t be her son.”

Lydia’s eyes are wet and Isaac feels it too. His eyes don’t sting, but the emotion swells up inside of him. It’s like a wave of pain. Almost... *grief*.

“There never was a Stiles, was there?” Malia asks.

Grief for someone who Isaac can’t remember, someone who probably never even existed.

“It doesn’t even sound like a real name,” Scott says.

“We *have* to keep looking,” Lydia says. She goes tight with strength, determination, stubbornness. “Check the school records again, or call Scott’s dad...”

“We’re fighting the wrong battle,” Malia says. She’s sympathetic and kind about it, but she doesn’t give in to Lydia’s emotions. She’s staying level and logical.

“We’re trying to bring Stiles back,” Lydia counters. She sounds shocked and hurt and betrayed.

Isaac wants to side with her so badly, but he doesn’t know how. He doesn’t know how to believe so fiercely. He lost his blind hope a long time ago. And, now, with no proof, no evidence, no tangible reality... Isaac might want to believe, but he doesn’t know if he *can*. He just doesn’t know how.

“The *Ghost Riders* came back,” Malia argues. She’s putting up a fight now, growing firm in her corner, “We still have no way of stopping them. And whatever they are, they’re *real*. We can’t keep chasing someone who isn’t.”

“He didn’t leave anything behind,” Scott says, frowning at Lydia. He says it like the words are being pried out of him, like he doesn’t want to give up, but doesn’t see another option. He says it like he’s siding with Malia, but Isaac wonders if that’s real. He wonders if that’s how Scott *really* feels, or how he thinks he’s supposed to. If it’s a front, or if it’s genuine.

“Just us,” Lydia says. She looks like she’s had the fight knocked out of her. And Isaac’s sure it’s temporary. He’s sure the defeat won’t last, that the urgency will rear up inside her again, but, in this moment, she looks wounded and empty.

Isaac breaks to see her this way.

“Wait,” Scott says. “Where’s Allison?”

He’s speaking to Lydia, but she doesn’t answer. She’s gone deep into her mind now, distracted by her thoughts. She’s hazy and faraway. Unfocused.

“I’ll call her,” Isaac says, dragging his phone up and out of his pocket.

It’s strange that Allison isn’t already here, when it’s her dad that is injured and uncertain, who might not survive this blow. It’s strange

that it took them so long to notice her absence, to question the missing link.

Still, despite it all, Isaac presses the call button. His phone rings out a dial tone, once, twice. Then—

“We’re sorry. The number you have reached is not in service. Please check the number or try again. This is a recording.”

Radio Silence

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 5

Word count: 8,338

Allison sprints through the automatic doors of the hospital, nearly running into Isaac and Derek on their way out. Everybody else has gone home by now. They're the last two to leave, staying behind long enough for Melissa to grill Derek for every detail of what happened to Argent and Isaac for every detail he's learned about the Wild Hunt.

Allison's hair is dripping wet from the rain. It's only a drizzle outside now, the downpour quieting as the threat of the Ghost Riders eases, if only for a moment. Allison's still soaked through though. She looks faintly freezing – it reminds Isaac of the ice bath – and her expression is lit with panic. "Isaac," she gasps. She looks and sounds like she's crying, but, somehow, Isaac instinctively knows that the wetness on her cheeks is only raindrops. "My dad – Lydia and I split up, I didn't. I just heard. Is he-?"

"He's stable for now," Derek cuts in. His voice is level and calm, but Isaac can hear traces of concern there, apology in his tone with the continuation of, "But we're not really sure what's going to happen."

Allison's entire body seems to slump. Isaac wonders if she's thinking about losing her mom, about losing both her parents, about becoming an orphan like Isaac. Or, like Isaac once was. He knows now that he's not *technically* an orphan, but, for all intents and purposes, he might as well be.

"Do you want me to go in with you?" Isaac asks, knowing full well that there's no one else up there and that Allison might want the comfort of company.

"No," Allison says, firmer and harsher and quicker than seems necessary. Though, in her next breath, she softens. She shakes her head and pushes a wet strand of hair over her shoulder, out of her face. "No. No, I'm okay. You should – You should get home and get some rest. I just... I want to be alone with him."

It strikes Isaac as a little bizarre. A part of him wants to press the

issues, wants to vow to wait out in the hall, just in case. But he doesn't. He respects her decision and nods, saying, "Okay."

Isaac doesn't ask her about the phone because it doesn't seem like the appropriate time. Instead, he simply tells her the room number and lets her go. Then, he and Derek turn out into the night, falling into a light jog to escape the rain.

They flee into Derek's car. Isaac falls back against the seat, staring intensely forward. His mind is racing with thoughts and implications and ideas, each one worse than the last.

"Isaac?" Derek tests. The keys are in the ignition and the car is on to get the heat pumping, but he doesn't put it in reverse and he doesn't pull out of the parking spot. "What are you thinking?"

"There's something going on with Allison," Isaac says. He can't articulate or explain it. There's no real evidence of it. It's just a feeling, a gut instinct, an intuition. "I don't know what it is, but I think it's because of the Hunt."

—

Isaac scans the hallway for Allison. He's not sure what he intends to say to or ask of her. He just knows that he has to see her. He *wants* to see her. It's a permanent ache in his lungs, a fragile reminder of something he cannot remember. He just needs to see her. He needs to see that she's okay, that she's here, that he was only overthinking things last night.

Distantly, Isaac hopes that whatever weirdness he sensed before was just a result of her stress, of her worry about her dad.

Once again, he finds Allison leaning against an unopened locker. Once again, he approaches her.

"Hey, Allison," he says. There are traces of pity in his tone, ones that he tries to tamp down and swallow away.

"Hi, Isaac," she returns. She doesn't look any different than yesterday. She looks *fine*. Though, that hardly means anything. Allison is just as good at pretending as the rest of them.

"How're you doing?" Isaac asks. He pitches his voice into something warm and kind – compassionate.

Allison gives a small shrug. "I'm okay." Her expression twists in a wry smile, aiming for a sort of dry humor with, "My neck's sore from spending all night at my dad's bedside. But. It's okay."

Isaac gives a sympathetic sort of grimace. "Is he doing any better?"

"Yeah," Allison says easily. She drops any pretenses of humor or brushing off of the subject, falling into something more genuine with, "It seems like he's going to make a full recovery."

"Oh," Isaac says. He has to admit: he's a little surprised at the quick turnaround. But, then again, Argent did have Melissa taking care of him. Maybe some of her positivity came to fruition, came to manifestation. Regardless, Isaac just says, "That's good."

Allison nods and smiles, the full display of her dimples. It's a little too cheery for the subject at hand, just a shade too far to be anything other than forced, but Isaac recognizes Allison's need for everyone to think she's okay. Even now, she's still not the best at letting people in, at being vulnerable. Isaac will respect that. He's just glad to see the same old Allison.

—

Isaac is studying in the library when Mason and Corey join him. They slide into the wooden chairs across from him, but they don't get their books out or move to do anything at all. They just sit there, staring at Isaac with something expectant in their eyes and the forward tilt of their frames.

Isaac sets his own book down, but leaves it open to a page spread with a photo of *The Fortune Teller*. Isaac gives a put upon sort of sigh, clasps his hands, and asks, "Can I help you?"

Mason and Corey share a glance. Then, Mason deflates a little bit. He loses some of his innate enthusiasm, falling just a notch slack. And, "I'm sorry I was wrong about Parrish."

Isaac sighs again, but this time it's more genuine than before. He should probably be more bothered by the persistent insecurity from the two of them. But, honestly, he doesn't really mind it. A quiet part of him kind of likes that they keep coming to him. It's sweet. It makes him feel... important, almost. "It's okay, Mason." And, "Besides, I'm not – I'm not convinced you were totally wrong. I think you might've been onto something."

That earns Isaac two very confused looks.

So, he elaborates, “Hellhounds and the Wild Hunt are almost always mentioned in reference to each other. There’s got to be some significance to that, something other than the Ghost Riders being *scared* of Parrish.”

Mason nods. He seems to internally perk up again, spirits rising at the knowledge that he didn’t completely fumble the ball. (It wouldn’t matter if he did, but Isaac prefers the self-satisfaction to self-pity, so he won’t say anything.)

Isaac swivels towards Corey, “And you? What do you want?”

Corey looks a little sheepish, a little caught out, but he must know that Isaac isn’t actually feeling any impatience or irritation because he asks, “Have you found anything that could link me to the Wild Hunt?”

Isaac knew the question was coming, but he still stings with the knowledge that all he can say is, “Not yet.”

Corey immediately slides down in his seat. He drains of energy as disappointment clouds the air around him, but it’s not just that. The atmosphere is thick with something else too. Something that smells like defeat, like a complete and utter absence of hope.

“But I’m going to keep looking,” Isaac says quickly, aiming for reassurance and hoping to push that scent out of the library, like a cool breeze of relief. “I think I need to shift away from researching about the Wild Hunt and focus more on chameleons.” He shrugs, “I doubt there will be a *direct* connection between the two, but, hopefully, I’ll find some implications that we can draw from.”

Corey gives a soft nod and an even softer smile. He doesn’t look very convinced, and he proves it when he says, “It’s okay if you don’t figure anything out. I’ll get used to being a mystery. I guess.”

He says it in such a way that Isaac knows it to be true, but he wonders what that acceptance will cost Corey. He wonders what toll that will take of him. In that moment, even more so than before, Isaac *commits* himself to finding answers for Corey, whatever they may be. Big or small, or good or bad – Corey deserves to know what he is. He deserves knowledge and Isaac is going to get it for him.

Isaac is headed towards his next class when he sees Scott come in through the blue exterior doors. He looks confused and frazzled and doesn't even notice Isaac at first. He's staring intently down at his phone with a certain weighted focus.

"Hey," Isaac says.

Scott jumps a little, looking up with a moon-eyed gaze. Isaac gives him a weak smile of both apology and amusement. (Though, he's not actually that sorry. There was no way for Isaac to come up to Scott *without* spooking him just a little.)

"Hi, Iz," Scott greets. There's a fondness in his tone, but he's still holding his phone in his hand and his expression doesn't ease. He remains locked in a state of bewilderment, something confused and lost.

"Everything okay?" Isaac asks.

"Uh," Scott intones. He throws a thumb over his shoulder, gesturing towards the double doors and, by extension, the parking lot outside. "Lydia found this Jeep. She – She thinks it's important, so we just," Scott shakes his head and gives a weak exhalation of laughter, like he can't believe what he's about to say, "we just bribed the tow truck guy to, y'know, *not* tow it."

For a second, Isaac delays. That's definitely not what he was expecting. He gives a feeble, "Oh." Then, upon another moment's reflection, "I think Allison and I saw the Jeep the other day." He remembers trying to hide behind a light blue car, remembers trying to escape detention. "So, it might've been here all week."

"Yeah, the guy said it was abandoned," Scott says. He gives a shrug, indicating that he's not convinced of the vehicle's importance. Still, he's playing along for Lydia's sake. Because it's important to her, so it'll be important to everyone else too.

Isaac nods. "Is that it?"

(He has a feeling it's not.)

"No," Scott says, confirming Isaac's theory, as vague as it was. "My mom just texted me about Argent. She said he hasn't gotten any better yet. I think she's starting to worry, so now I'm worried too."

Isaac freezes. He just caught Allison in a lie.

But, the thing is, Scott is looking at him with these wide eyes and chemosignals wrought with fear and concern. And Isaac can't find it in himself to be worried about Allison when he's met with such a sight, when Scott is standing right in front of him and looking at Isaac *like that*. It's imploring and desperate and Isaac has half a mind to pull him into a hug.

So, for now, for this moment, Isaac brushes it off as a miscommunication or a sudden change in status. For now, he pushes aside the revelation and focuses on Scott, on his scared brown eyes and the anxiety in his scent.

"Argent's tough," Isaac says. "He'll pull through. I'm sure of it." And, "If you want, I can text Derek? Maybe he knows some fancy healing trick."

Scott shrugs in that noncommittal way that Isaac knows means he *wants* to take him up on the offer, but doesn't want to be a bother. He says, "You don't have to."

Isaac smiles, shakes his head. "I'm texting him right now. You can't stop me. I've decided."

Scott smiles back at him. Something small and faint, something that says, *thank you*.

—

Once the text is sent, Isaac and Scott part ways. Isaac doesn't really want to leave Scott's side. He never does, but especially not when Scott is clearly torn up and struggling as he is right now. But Isaac doesn't really have a choice. Unfortunately, he does have an English class to get to.

There, he sits next to Malia. He can't help but notice the empty desk in front of her. It strikes Isaac as a little odd, if only because he remembers this being a crowded classroom, one where every desk is filled. But, as he stares at the vacant chair, he can't think of who should be sitting there. It pounds at his brain, a throbbing question and an answer just out of reach.

That is, until Malia breaks him out of his daze, asking, "What are you staring at?"

Isaac pulls himself out of his hyper-focus. He peels his eyes from the desk and turns to look at Malia, giving a slight shake of his head and,

“Nothing, sorry. Just zoned out for a second.”

Malia gives him a look of mild disbelief, an expression that almost reads as disgust. But Isaac doesn't take it personally. That's just Malia's face.

“Derek helped me,” Malia says. It comes seemingly out of nowhere, but, if Isaac knows Malia at all, then he knows she must have been impatiently waiting for the opportunity to say this. It comes out sounding a little scripted, but not insincere. “He told me that we stay human when we get involved. Like, he was at his most animalistic when he tried to withdraw and isolated himself and refused to help. And... he was right. Helping the stupid people from the party actually... *anchored* me.”

“Oh,” Isaac says. He's a little shocked at just how quickly Derek's advice resonated with Malia. But, more than that, he feels proud. Not just of Malia, but of Derek too. They've both come such a long way. Still, Isaac doesn't really know how to respond to the sudden declaration, so he draws out an, “Okay...?”

“I know you talked to him,” Malia blurts, making clear what this is really about. “I know you told Derek to try to help me. So. Thank you.”

This surprises Isaac more than the initial confession. He gives a brief nod and only says, “Yeah, sure.”

Malia nods back at him. It's all a little stiff and borderline uncomfortable. Because Malia and Isaac have never been super close, have never had any real reason to bond, but, now that Malia is growing her relationship with Derek, it might be time to amend that.

Well, maybe not *right now* because, just as the thought passes through Isaac's mind, there's a high-pitched burst of sound. It's a reverberating squeal of something harsh and ringing.

On instinct, Isaac turns to Malia. She has her hands held protectively to her ears, an instant answer to Isaac's unspoken question. They make one second of eye contact, then they're on their feet and rushing out the door, ignoring the frustrated calls of their English teacher.

They follow the faint but piercing sound through the hallway and down stone stairs, stepping into the main level of the school. There, they find Scott standing in the entry hall.

“You heard it too?” he asks them.

“Where’s it coming from?” Malia questions instead, answering without answering.

Scott turns towards the end of the hall, towards the blue double doors. He nods in the direction of the exit, whispering, “This way.”

He leads them in a slow jog, out past the doors and onto the edge of the sidewalk. From here, Isaac gets his first glimpse of Lydia and his second glimpse at the car. Lydia is perfectly still in the middle of the parking lot, back turned to the school and attention locked on a light blue Jeep.

There’s a brief, momentary pause – a standstill of worried confusion where they merely drink in the sight laid out before them. Then, they pick up the pace once more. Their jog turns into a run and they cross the parking lot in a matter of seconds, joining Lydia in front of dull headlights and chipped paint.

“It’s coming from inside,” she says, voice barely a whisper and eyes never straying from the car.

Isaac pays closer attention to the humming of sound. It’s a little louder now. Not as bad at the initial onslaught of screeching cries, but it’s clearer than it was from the hall. It’s a crackling static, a scraping of feedback.

Scott and Malia approach the driver’s side door while Isaac stays with Lydia. She’s unraveling just a little, they can all tell. Whatever’s happening, it’s affecting her more severely, she’s losing her footing in a way that Isaac has never seen. Even with all that she’s been through, Isaac has never seen Lydia lose her composure like this. (Which, isn’t to say this hasn’t happened before, only that it hasn’t in Isaac’s presence.) Isaac doesn’t want to leave her unaccompanied in a parking lot, even just to move three feet away.

“Did someone just lock the keys inside?” Malia suggests.

Lydia either doesn’t hear her or doesn’t care, simply says, “Break it.”

Scott looks at Lydia, and then at Isaac. There’s a fumbling in his gaze, an uncertainty in where his next step should lie.

And so, Isaac nods. He gives just the barest of movements, just the slightest of guidance. And Scott takes it.

He turns the handle in his grip, pressing down and down against the lock until it *snaps* against the pressure with a quiet crash of sound. Then, the door pops open and the whirring grows louder.

There's a radio inside the Jeep. Like a proper communication radio, not the kind for music or car ride concerts. It's got two rows of red switches and one row of blue. They're all labeled with different functions, but most of them make very little sense to Isaac.

He's in the backseat with Scott, digging around for clues and trying to place the lingering feeling of familiarity. Meanwhile, Malia and Lydia are in the front, presumably, doing the same thing.

Then, suddenly, the radio cuts off. Just as it came, there's no warning when it leaves. The white noise turns to nothing and the Jeep goes suffocating with the onslaught of silence.

"Why'd it stop?" Malia questions, brusque with it. She's looking at Lydia when she asks, expecting her to have the answers.

"It doesn't matter," Lydia says. She flips one of the red buttons – the one labeled *Master Switch* – on and off, on and off. Nothing happens, but Lydia just breathes an exhale of, "There has to be a reason."

Scott jerks his head to one side. His eyes go closed and his eyebrows furrow. His face twists up and his chin pulls back. He releases a quiet, reactionary breath of, "*what?*"

That draws the attention of the girls, but Isaac is already there, already knows what that face means. "You caught a scent?"

"Yeah," Scott says. "Uh..." He's blinking quickly, eyes turning to roam over the interior of the Jeep – the floor, the back of the seats, the ceiling. "Ours. *Mine*," a gesture towards Isaac, "yours," and, "all four of us."

"I've never been in this Jeep before," Malia counters, giving a pointed shrug and a shake of her head.

"Neither have I," Scott emphasizes, but he says it with less certainty than Malia. Like, as soon as the words have left his mouth, he hears the *wrongness* in the statement.

And Isaac feels it too. That tickle of familiarity flares up inside him,

making his skin itch and his fingers twitch. He wants to squirm and break free of the blue metal confines. There's a claustrophobia in this unknowing, there's a trapping in the memories that just won't give.

"Yes, we have," Lydia says. She sighs and lifts her eyes to the ceiling. "We just don't remember it."

Malia speaks through her teeth with eyes purposely widened, a little bit pleading in her tone of, "I thought we were done with that."

Isaac doesn't remember ever being inside this Jeep. No memories of it come to the surface, and yet, he can't shake the connection he feels. There's something in the blue paint, in the squeaky seats, in the... blood splattered above Malia's head. There is *something* here.

"Uh, yeah, Lydia," Scott says, splaying a hand out in explanation, "Parrish checked the VIN number. There's no record of owner."

"The Jeep didn't just *drive itself* here," Lydia argues.

She draws up a good point, enough so that, when Scott turns to look at Malia, to see what she has to say to that, he appears just a little bit swayed.

Malia drops her volume, shrugging up her shoulders, but still talking through a mouth almost fully closed, "Whose side are you on?"

Scott catches on the question. He turns a little bit comically bug-eyed. He cranes his neck back and forth between Lydia and Malia before falling back from where he's pressed between the center console. He lands more firmly in the backseat, rooted next to Isaac with an amicable, "I'm on everyone's side."

Scott turns to look at Isaac then. His gaze morphs into something incessant and a little imploring. The issue is: Isaac can't make out what it is that Scott wants from him. He simultaneously raises his eyebrows and angles his head to one side, clearly asking, *what?*

Scott gives him nothing. His expression goes blank and he focuses back towards the front of the car again. (Isaac suppresses a disappointed sigh.)

"He's not real," Malia is saying when Isaac tunes back in. "Trust me."

Lydia sighs and starts rifling through the glove box. She's not giving in that easily. She wants so badly to be right. And, honestly, Isaac kind of

wants her to be too.

“I’ve lost a lot of people in my life,” Malia says, leaning over to speak to Lydia even as she turns away. “It’s a long list and I don’t feel like adding to it.”

As much as Isaac does kind of hope that Lydia is right, he also understands where Malia is coming from. Isaac has lost a lot of people too. He’s lost more than he can ever really comprehend. He doesn’t want to add to that. But, maybe, by some miracle, or by some act of growth, his perspective is becoming a *bit* more optimistic than Malia’s.

Because, yeah, it’s terrifying to consider losing another person, but all Isaac can think of is what he stands to gain if Lydia is right.

Lydia pulls something free from the glove box. She raises a hand beside her face, almost a gesture of, *wait*, an indication of, *got something*.

“We might not have to,” she says. She turns smug, grinning with something satisfied and proud. “Not if we get him back.”

And that’s the thing: if Malia is right, then nothing changes. Isaac keeps his long list of losses. If Stiles never existed, then there’s nothing there to lose. Isaac gets no relief and no consolation. But, if *Lydia* is right, then there’s a chance. Sure, there’s a chance that they still lose Stiles, that they can’t save him, but, more importantly, there’s a chance that they *can*. There’s a chance for relief. There’s a hope for something good, something more, something *gained*.

Lydia holds out a piece of paper and Malia takes it from her. She scans her eyes over the aged and yellowed paper, then hands it back to Scott and Isaac to get a look.

“It’s from ‘96,” Scott says. “*And...* there’s no name.”

“But there’s an address,” Isaac says, pointing it out on the page. He reads off, “129 Woodbine Lane.”

“I know that address,” Lydia says.

And, somehow, Isaac does too. Somehow, despite never having been there, he knows that’s the sheriff’s house.

Isaac has to work, Allison is going to visit her dad at the hospital, and, after what happened with Elias, Scott and Malia definitely aren't Sheriff Stilinski's favorite people. Which leaves only Lydia, and it's decided that she'll go to the Stilinski household on her own.

They're trying to optimize the success of the visit, but, still, Isaac can't help but feel a little guilty. They're putting so much of the burden onto Lydia, leaving so much up to her.

And now, Isaac feels useless behind the glass counter of the comic store. He feels like he should be doing more, but, honestly, he can't afford to miss another shift. So, he just tries to zone into the routine of the job.

Ding.

The bell of the shop rings, signaling to Isaac the arrival of a customer and the opening of the door. But, when he turns to greet them with his cheery customer service voice, he sees Scott in the entrance.

Isaac can't fight his smile at the surprise appearance. He doesn't have to plaster on his enthusiasm when he says, "Hi. Welcome to Beacon Comics."

Scott grins back at him. "Hey."

Isaac realizes, with a hint of shock, that this is the first time Scott has visited him at work. It's strange because Isaac definitely remembers having company during some of his shifts, but he doesn't think much of the ghostly feeling. He's getting used to the discrepancies in his memory. He's getting used to the confusion and the feeling of *missing*.

"What's going on?" Isaac asks, assuming Scott is here with an update. "Did something happen?"

"What? I can't just come visit you?" Scott questions. There's a lighthearted tone to his voice, a jab meant only to break through the sudden tension in Isaac's shoulders.

And it works. Because it's Scott, so of course it does. Isaac's body relaxes as he gives a light laugh, and says, "No. No, that's fine."

Scott sidles up to the counter, standing on the opposite side as Isaac, pressing his hands into the cool glass of the surface. But he doesn't say anything else. And Isaac can tell that there's something more he needs to add.

“Scott,” Isaac whispers. It’s nearly a question, but not quite.

Scott swallows and exhales. Then, with only a touch of urgency, with all the ingredients for casual conversation, “Do you think Stiles is real?”

Isaac goes blank. He probably should have been ready for Scott to ask him for his opinion, but he’s caught off guard regardless. And, when he opens his mouth, it’s not an answer that falls out. Without his consent, comes a tactless, “Why are you asking me?”

(Thankfully the, “*why not Allison?*” goes unspoken.)

Scott stares at Isaac for a moment. There’s a counter between them, at least two feet of space, but Isaac still feels cornered under the weight of those eyes. Scott’s looking at him with intensity, like he should already know, like it’s always been leading to this.

“Because I trust you.”

Isaac pauses. Because he remembers saying those same words to Scott. He remembers it as a formative moment, a moment when the ground shook beneath his feet, when his atoms rearranged. He remembers it as a moment of clarity.

But hearing those words echoed back at him, hearing them from Scott... it feels like reflection.

So much has changed between them since the days of the kanima, since the alpha pack, the nogitsune, the assassins, and the Dread Doctors. With each subsequent threat, their relationship has evolved. They’ve grown a little closer, a little stronger, a little *more*.

Back at the start, in the animal clinic when he first said those words, Isaac sort of *trailed* after Scott. He trusted him implicitly as the first person to ever show him unconditional kindness. He trusted Scott because he cared about everyone. And, because, somehow, that included Isaac. Because, somehow, he had caught Scott’s attention. Because, somehow, he had become important to Scott.

Now, though, in the comic store when the words are repeated back to him, it’s different. Isaac still trusts Scott with everything he has, but it goes both ways now. It’s not just Isaac trailing after Scott. Now, they follow each other. Now, they’re equals. And they have been for a while. Isaac just hadn’t noticed. He’d been too busy, too distracted. He hadn’t felt it when the ground shifted again.

Because I trust you.

It's such a simple phrase, but it means everything. Trust is everything. All Isaac has ever wanted is to be trusted, and he is. Scott *trusts* him. Though, looking at him now, Isaac knows there's something Scott's not telling him.

It isn't just trust. It's more than that.

"You trust me?" Isaac asks. His voice is soft, almost teasing. The pieces are coming together now. Isaac is starting to get it.

Scott has come to Isaac before anyone else. Not just because he trusts him, not just because he promised to ask Isaac's opinion, but because...

Because he *loves* him.

"Of course I trust you," Scott says softly. He's got a grin coming through the cracks, a spark of feeling in his eyes.

All it takes is one phrase, and, suddenly, everything becomes clear. All of Isaac's doubts, all his confidence in unrequited love, it all fades. In a single heartbeat, Isaac knows.

He still sees Scott as that beacon of light and hope, but it's less idolizing now – more real. Now, Isaac sees Scott for who he really is. He knows him and understands him and sees him. Isaac trusts him, but it's different now.

It isn't just trust. It's more than that.

Isaac loves him. And, looking at Scott now, with his warm brown eyes and his lopsided smile, Isaac knows it goes both ways. He's not sure what it is exactly, he's not sure what makes it so obvious. It just *is*. Isaac just *knows*.

But he doesn't do anything about it.

Because he can't. As certain as he suddenly is of Scott's feelings, it does nothing to change the circumstances. There's still uncertainty all around them. Everything is precarious and out of place. Isaac's memories feel like a fraying patchwork quilt, he feels disjointed in every step. So, while he trusts Scott and he trusts his own intuition, he doesn't trust the situation.

It's too risky.

If there's one thing Isaac can't lose, it's Scott. He feels the shift, feels his atoms rearranging once more, but it's not worth it. The reward would be everything Isaac has ever wanted, but the risk would *destroy* him. He just can't do it.

And, besides, there's also the Allison of it all. Scott might love Isaac now, but he couldn't bear to be nothing more than a pitstop on his way to true love. Scott might love him now, but Isaac doesn't want to be a temporary fix, a way station. He doesn't want to stand between them, doesn't want to keep them from happiness just to ensure his own.

So, for now, because the timing isn't right, Isaac doesn't do anything. He just says, "Yeah, I – I do think Stiles is real."

And it's the truth. It's not delusion and it's not blind optimism. It's what Isaac genuinely believes. There's too much that just doesn't make sense. There are too many holes for this to just be coincidence.

There's a flicker of disappointment in Scott, a momentary let down. Then, he really hears the words spoken, really registers their meaning, and he perks, "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Isaac says. He smiles at Scott, at the pureness of his emotions.

"Then, what do we do?" Scott asks.

He's asking Isaac for his advice. Because he trusts him. Because he loves him.

—

Following Isaac's advice, they go back to the school and the Jeep. There's something about it that Isaac is *stuck* on. It's their biggest clue and their best shot at proof. Except, right now, the tow truck guy is back and he's trying to take it away from them.

"We already paid you," Scott argues uselessly. He sounds a little indignant and slighted, frustrated that the guy seems to be yanking them around. "I gave you all of my money for that drop free."

Then, bright headlights shine on the parking lot, pulling up a few spaces away. Isaac recognizes it as Lydia's car, watching as she quickly gets out and rushes over, just in time to hear the driver say,

“Yeah, and I dropped it. Now, I’m picking it up again.”

Isaac wonders if the Jeep might be more trouble than it’s worth. He wonders if they’re wasting their time. He wonders, but he knows it doesn’t matter. It’s their only lead. It’s just like visiting Elias. They don’t know what this Jeep is going to bring them, they just know that it’s important.

Isaac can only hope that this endeavor goes better than breaking into the nursing home did.

“How much?” Lydia says, only slightly out of breath. “I’ll write you a check.”

“It’s not about how much. They want it out of here, okay? It’s not up to me,” the tow truck driver says. He makes a move toward the Jeep, but Scott blocks his path. He steps right up in front of him, standing almost chest to chest. The guy is bigger and taller than Scott, but Isaac doesn’t doubt his ability to take him out if need be.

“Don’t make me move you, kid,” the tow truck driver says, shaking his head and letting his voice go dark and dangerous. It’s a threat, but it’s laughable. Isaac would like to see him to try. “I’m hooking this thing up and I am towing it away.”

Scott balls his hand into a fist. Isaac can hear his knuckles cracking with the force of it. And that shouldn’t make Isaac smile as much as it does, but he can’t help it. Seeing Scott step into his powers, into his alpha status, into his strength... it does something to Isaac.

Then, there’s a rattle from behind them.

Isaac looks over the shoulder of the tow truck driver. Both disappointing and fortunate, Scott doesn’t have to get his hands dirty. Malia is standing there, holding the hook in her hands. And, easy as tearing paper, she rips it apart with nothing more than a metallic scrape and, “Your truck’s broke.”

—

Isaac, Scott, and Lydia sit inside the Jeep while Malia stands watch outside. Or, at least, that’s what she says she’s doing. Isaac doesn’t doubt that she’s keeping an eye out, but he does doubt her motivations. He has a pretty strong inkling that her refusal to get inside the car has more to do with her hesitancy to get onboard with the Stiles theory than any safety concerns.

“The Jeep belonged to Stilinski’s wife,” Lydia says, beginning to fill them in on what she learned during her evening at the sheriff’s house. “But it was stolen years ago, I think before she even died.” Lydia sighs and shrugs, “It’s... not proof. It’s not evidence. It’s – It’s nothing.”

And it’s a little painful, that just when Isaac and Scott are really stepping into the idea of Stiles, Lydia is backing away.

“But the Jeep was in their family?” Scott clarifies. “It belonged to them?”

Lydia nods.

“Then it *is* something,” Scott says, correcting her former statement. “It’s connected somehow. We just – We just have to figure out how.”

Isaac admires his optimism, but he’s losing faith. Not in Stiles, not in his existence, but in their ability to figure this out. Stilinski should be their biggest asset right now, but he’s not cooperating. He’s holding back and hesitating, and that’s hindering all of them. And, the thing is, it doesn’t make any sense.

“Stilinski doesn’t know about the supernatural, right?” Isaac prompts.

Lydia and Scott both look over at him. There’s confusion in their expressions. They agree with a scattered, jumbled chorus of, “Right.”

“Think about it,” Isaac says, “that doesn’t make *any* sense. Think about,” he lifts a hand, gesticulating as he speaks, “every crime scene we’ve shown up at and every impossible way we’ve avoided blame. Think of *all* that has happened since Scott was bitten.” Isaac shakes his head, huffing a laugh. “Either, Stilinski is *terrible* at his job... or there’s something more going on here.”

“What are you saying?” Scott asks.

“Maybe...” Isaac looks over at Scott, “maybe he doesn’t remember the supernatural because he doesn’t remember Stiles.”

Lydia is the first to recognize his implications, the idea behind the words. A glint of excitement catches fire in her eyes, a flame of returning determination. She nods a little rapidly and says, “So we just have to get him to believe.”

Isaac nods. If they can get Stilinski to believe in the supernatural, to understand the context of their admittedly ridiculous theory of a

forgotten son, then maybe he'll come around.

But, before they can get any further with the prospect, there's a gigantic, bellowing roar.

The sound comes out of nowhere, barreling through the air and practically shaking the ground with its force. It brings a jump and a gasp from the three of them, and then they're rushing out of the Jeep, running to fall in line next to Malia.

"Did you hear that?" she asks.

"I think all of Beacon Hills heard that," Lydia counters with a hint of snark.

"Who is it?" Scott asks.

"I'm not sure," Malia says. She turns to look at him, adding, "But I think I recognized it."

For a moment, nothing happens. They just stand there, glued in place in the shock of the roar – the kind that burns past your ears and vibrates in your lungs. It stays heavy in the air, like dread and worry and uncertainty.

Then, Lydia yells, "Go!"

And they do. Isaac, Scott, and Malia take off after the sound, sprinting on foot and not looking back.

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They run until they reach the preserve, only then do they slow their place, but still only just. They stick together as they rush towards the unknown, towards the call of a wolf that no one can place or remember.

Derek almost slams into Isaac. He comes around a bend in a high speed chase, barely managing to hit the brakes in time to avoid a collision.

"Isaac?" he gasps, grappling at the younger man's shoulder, half for balance and half for the reassurance of touch. There's a wildness in Derek's eyes, stunned and overwhelmed and frantic.

"You heard it too?" Isaac guesses.

Derek nods. "I think I recognize it. I don't – I don't know. I got a scent, but..."

Derek trails off, like he doesn't know how to explain what he's thinking. Or, worse, like he's scared.

"Something's wrong with it," Scott says, coming up next to Isaac and filling in the blank.

"It smells like whoever it is..." Derek sighs, "is *burning*."

And that would explain the fear. Isaac bristles at the new information, at the knowledge of Derek's past and the haunting of these woods and those words.

Just then, the wolf roars again. It's a little quieter this time, like whoever it is is losing strength, but it's closer too.

This time, they don't hesitate.

They follow the roar through a clearing of trees and down a hill. They start in a sprint, but slow down as smoke reaches their sight and their scent.

There's a body collapsed in the middle of the woods, lying on leaf strewn ground and completely unrecognizable. The person is covered in burns. Isaac can smell the dripping of flesh, the mottled texture and the black char. It makes his eyes sting and his body lock up.

"I hear a heartbeat," Malia whispers.

Scott holds out an arm, stopping any of them from getting too close too fast. "Who is that?"

"I don't know, but I know the scent," Malia answers. "Even through the barbeque."

Derek breathes, barely enough volume to count for anything, "Me too."

Scott looks between the two of them, dropping his hand low enough that Malia passes it by. She approaches the feeble form of the fading life, approaches the body and crouches down at his side.

"How do you think he got here?" Scott asks, looking around at the surrounding woods, as if searching for some sort of clue. "There's no tracks, no fire."

It's a logical question, but Isaac is still more focused on trying not to gag. And, also, on Derek. He's focused on the climbing speed of his heart, of the emotional agony taking up a home in his chemosignals, still faintly present even through the overpowering smell of burning flesh.

Then, the person opens his eyes. Malia gasps at the sudden connection, at the sudden sign of life, but she doesn't flee. She sinks deeper into the forest floor, staring with composure and steadiness, and, "Peter?"

The man can't open his mouth, but he nods despite the pain it must cause to do so. Isaac remembers electrical burns across his own neck, remembers how every movement seared through his body, a zipping zing of a gunpowder spark.

Everyone gathers in closer now. Scott ducks down to crouch, but Isaac and Derek stay standing. In fact, Derek hardly moves at all. He seems frozen in place. Isaac hopes against all odds that it's not fear keeping him still.

"Who's Peter?" he asks.

"Peter Hale," Malia whispers, a ghost of sound. "My dad."

Derek looks down at Malia and back at the burnt figure. Just as quiet, he says, "My uncle."

Flashes of memory hit Isaac all at once. Claws in the back of his neck, infuriating smirks, Mexico and deceit. And there's no fear in Isaac. Instead, he *pools* with anger. It twists in his stomach, churning into knots. It's a feeling fixed in time and in memory, stuck in the voice inside his mind, the voice saying, *"I hope you're comfortable saying whatever is that you're feeling straight to my face."*

(Isaac still doesn't like him.)

"Peter," Scott gasps, stuttering with eyes startled and flickering fast. He's remembering too. Isaac can see it in his face, can see the blossoming recognition and the frantic return of interactions and battlegrounds. "He bit me. H-How could I forget him?"

Malia exhales, "How did *I* forget him?"

Isaac edges a little closer to Derek, in comfort and reassurance. He knows Derek is thinking the same thing. He's asking himself how he

could forget his uncle – the only family he has left, the only family to survive the fire, the only family Derek killed with his own hands.

“He has something,” Malia says, reaching for Peter’s jerking and twitching hand. It’s bound in a fist, unable to be opened or moved, too stiff with the burns and the pain.

Noise starts to break at the back of Peter’s throat, stilted and aching sounds. It’s agony and hurt, it’s suffering and tortured.

Scott grabs Peter’s arm. He doesn’t have to try hard to pull in pain. Caring comes naturally to Scott, always has and always will. His arms line with black and his face twists with discomfort, but he doesn’t let go.

And then, Derek finally kneels down. He comes out of his frozen state, approaching his uncle and coming closer. He kneels next to Malia, placing his hand over Peter’s. He starts taking pain too.

Isaac’s eyes well with tears. He blames the harsh scents and the smoke, but he knows it’s deeper than that. He knows it’s Derek and Scott, working together and taking pain from their first joint enemy. He knows Scott is doing so on instinct, on reflex, on automatic. While Derek has to *force* himself forward. What’s so easy for Scott is a triumph for Derek.

Eventually, Peter goes still. He stops shuddering and the noises fade out of existence. He stops moving and Derek lets go.

Gently, Malia opens Peter’s hand.

“What is it?” Scott asks.

With a soft jingle of metal against metal, Malia holds up a set of car keys.

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It’s the keys to the Jeep. It has to be. There’s no other explanation, there’s nothing else that makes sense. It has to be the connection they’ve been looking for, the breakthrough moment to push them past the first hurdle of unknown and into proof and certainty.

Malia and Derek stayed behind, helping Peter up and towards the hospital, while Isaac and Scott raced back towards the Jeep with keys in tow. There, they found Lydia waiting for them, sitting in the Jeep

and ready to try anything.

And now, Isaac and Scott have joined her. Isaac sits in the back and Scott in the passenger seat. It feels so hauntingly familiar. Once again, his body seems to find comfort here, seems to settle here like it's something adjacent to home. Meanwhile, his mind rages with the implications, scrambling and stumbling to catch up.

Lydia holds up the car key with bated breath.

This is it.

She slides the key into the ignition with a click of something *right*.

Lydia turns her fist and the engine rumbles and groans, clicking and shuddering, struggling to start. It fights and flutters, but dies down without a catch.

Lydia looks at Scott. She looks a little scared, a little lost, a little worried. And Scott looks back at her, not giving much in his expression, but it's enough to be reassuring. It's enough for her to try again.

Isaac watches through the rearview mirror as Lydia takes a deep, trembling inhale. He watches her face as she squeezes her eyes shut, then flicks down to her hand as she turns the key.

Again, the engine sputters and grinds, but doesn't light. She starts pressing on the gas then. Once, twice, three times.

"Careful," Scott says. "Don't flood it."

Lydia listens and lets go, but asks, "Do you even know what that means?"

Scott's eyebrows ripple and he turns a little bashful. "Not really."

Lydia gives a soft laugh, but it holds no substance. It's empty and hollow. It's shallow and scared. They're right on the precipice of something, something real and true. They're right on the edge of confirmation. They can't back down now.

"Try it again," Isaac says.

Lydia does. She twists the key, thrusting it forward and spinning the internal gears. And, this time, the Jeep comes to life. The engine sparks and roars. The headlights burst with a shining yellow glow,

bathing the parking lot with dawning hope.

There's so much exhilaration in that moment, it can't be contained. They break into startled laughter. It's not empty or hollow. It's flushed and filled.

Then, the radio comes on. The buttons start to flash and it whirs with a mechanical beeping. Scott reaches for one of the knobs, going to change the frequency, to try to tune out the static, but Lydia stops him, "Wait. Wait, wait, wait."

Scott looks between her and the radio, confusion written in his features.

"Hello? Is anyone there? Can anyone hear me?"

A voice comes through the speakers. And it's not just anyone's. It's Stiles' voice.

Lydia reaches for the handheld radio, giving a stuttered, "S-Stiles?"

"Stiles, are you there?" Scott's voice comes next.

For a moment, it goes muted. There's no answer from the other line. It's just silent static. Isaac starts to worry, starts to feel a weight pressing on his chest, one that only alleviates when he breathes, "Stiles?"

The crackling grows a little louder. Then, *"Lydia? Scott? Isaac? Is that you?"*

Isaac can't contain his relief. It comes out as a quivering exhale and a wet smile.

"Oh my god, Stiles," Lydia exclaims. Her voice is a bright grin of, "We can hear you."

"Oh my god," Stiles echoes, quiet and hushed in his own awe. *"You know me? You remember me?"*

"Stiles, is th – is this you?" Lydia asks. She's clutching the radio like a lifeline, like she can't quite believe this is happening, like she can't quite believe she was right. Her knuckles are white with the grip and her voice cracks with, "Is this actually you?"

"Yeah, it's me. Do you remember the last thing I said to you?"

“You said...” Lydia looks at Scott and Isaac. She swallows and hesitates. She whispers, “You said, ‘remember I love you.’”

It feels like a private moment, like a secret between the two of them. It feels like an intrusion, but, more than that, it feels real. Stiles feels so real.

Isaac’s memories are still hazy and broken, but he can imagine his face now. He can remember what it felt like to stand in Stiles’ presence, in his contagious emotions and flailing limbs.

Isaac can’t remember specifics, but he can remember enough. He can remember enough to know that they were right. That Stiles is real and he’s theirs.

“Are you okay?” Scott speaks into the radio.

Isaac doesn’t give Stiles a chance to answer, leaning over the center console, getting as close as he can to the radio. He redirects to the information that’s most important, most vital, “Where are you?”

“We’re coming to get you,” Scott says without hesitation. There’s nothing Scott wouldn’t do for Stiles, no line he wouldn’t cross. Isaac remembers that now. He remembers the ferocity of their connection, the strength of their relationship, their ability to overcome every obstacle together.

“No,” Stiles says. *“No, you can’t. You won’t be able to find me.”*

Scott grapples for the radio now. The words come like a dousing of ice cold water, like a downpour on their relief and joy. He stammers, “Stiles, wh – what – what are you talking about? Just tell us where you are and we’ll, we’ll come and–”

“Just remember this,” Stiles says, cutting Scott off. *“Canaan. Okay? You have to find Canaan. Just find Canaan.”*

The radio cuts off. The static crackling goes silent. Stiles is gone.

Ghosted

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 6

Word count: 8,622

“All right, you heard a voice coming through the radio and now you’re convinced it’s the voice of...” Allison trails off, shaking her head in disbelief.

“Stiles,” Isaac fills in. “Our friend. My best friend.”

“Uh-huh,” Allison nods. Her lips form a pursed line. It’s not a mean expression, but it’s not considering either. “And maybe it was just a random signal cross?”

“Peter gave us the keys to the Jeep and it started right up,” Malia cuts in. She’s sitting next to Isaac at the library table, and, though she wasn’t there last night, she’s found confirmation in Peter and car keys. She’s a little skeptical, sure, but, mostly, she believes.

Allison is the only one who still isn’t on board. She gives a little scoff, “And what? Now, I’m supposed to trust *Peter Hale*?”

Isaac’s sure she’s thinking of everything that happened when Peter was the alpha, or, possibly, when he was The Benefactor. And he understands that it’s a complicated affair for Allison, but he has no sympathy for Kate Argent, no ability to care for her at all. So, he just says, “I want you to trust *me*. I heard Stiles on the radio. I’m sure of it.”

It’s an unfair card to play, but it works – to some extent. Allison just sighs and shrugs. She doesn’t outwardly protest again, but she doesn’t give in either. It’s frustrating, but Isaac tries to be considerate. The theory is a bit of a stretch, maybe it’s only right that one of them keeps their feet on the ground, that one of them remains realistic. Maybe one of them needs to stay uninvolved so that, if or when the theory comes apart, they can be there to pick up the pieces.

Just then, Lydia enters the library. She keeps her chin held high and her usual mask of indifference in place as she marches over to their table, but, as she sits down, Isaac sees the tiredness in her eyes. She

looks like she's ready for this to be over.

"You okay?" Isaac asks gently.

"I had this dream last night," Lydia says, in lieu of a proper response. She rests her chin on her hand, getting a dark glint to her eyes. By the looks of it, it wasn't a pleasant dream. "I was in the locker room, looking in a mirror. And then this... this woman appeared. I fell in through the mirror, into a – a town." Lydia blinks and parts her mouth a few times. "I'm pretty sure it was Canaan. There was this huge carousel and they were having a picnic with all the neighbors. Everything was... Everything was fine until it just," Lydia swallows, "*wasn't*."

"Wait," Malia says with a hint of a smile, "you saw a carousel?"

Isaac smirks, if only because it's easier than focusing on the contents of the dream, of what Lydia could possibly mean by *wasn't*.

Lydia looks over at the two of them with narrowed eyes and an unimpressed stare. "And a big sign that said 'Canaan' and people disappearing clouds of smoke."

And *there* it is. The horrible revelation Isaac was waiting for.

"Do you ever have nice dreams?" Allison asks. There's a humorous lilt to her inflection, but it doesn't exactly land. If anything, it comes out sounding a little harsh, a little blaming.

Lydia merely rolls her eyes. She drops her head off her hand and turns grave with, "We need to go to Canaan."

Isaac agrees, but, "It would be helpful if we knew *anything* about the place." He juts a thumb between himself and Malia, "We keep calling the number for City Hall, and no one answers. The only map we can find it on is *thirty* years old."

"And by 'we' he means *only* me," Malia says, sardonic in tone, but not unkind.

It's true. Isaac hasn't once picked up the phone. But he doesn't stoop to the bait, ignoring Malia's accusation in favor of unfolding the map, revealing the label of **Canaan** circled in red marker.

"So far, all we know about Canaan is where it is," Malia says.

Lydia stands to get a better look at the map. She bends her knees a little, then presses up again, swaying with her next words, a somehow predictable yet unexpected, “That’s all we need to know.”

Isaac sighs. Road trip it is.

Isaac learns from his nursing home mistake and calls Derek before they get on the road. Derek might have said he wasn’t mad, and Isaac might believe him now, but he’s certain that a second disappearance won’t be taken as calmly. (Meaning: Derek will be incredibly worried. Not that he would *do* anything to Isaac.)

“Hey. Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Isaac answers. “We’ve found Canaan, so we’re gonna go.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? I mean... you don’t know what you’re walking into. It could – It could be dangerous.” Derek sounds tired, but in a less obvious way than Lydia. It’s heard mostly in his word choice, in his dropped filter and casual vulnerability, the easily spotted nerves he holds for Isaac’s well-being.

“Stiles wouldn’t send us somewhere dangerous,” Isaac says.

“Wouldn’t he?” Derek counters. He doesn’t really remember Stiles, but, honestly, Isaac doesn’t really remember him either. It’s more of a vague idea, a static photo in his mind and a few blurry videos. But... Derek makes a lucky guess and hits the target with a bullseye.

Still, Isaac only laughs, and assures him that, “We’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” Derek says in a show of trust. “I’m staying at the hospital for a bit. You can tell Allison I’m keeping an eye on her dad.”

Isaac knows Argent is only half the reason that Derek is there. It’s about Peter too. Something between them changed upon his charred return, something in *Derek* changed. For Isaac, he’s still angry. He still thinks of Peter and thinks of Mexico and everything he’s ever done to hurt Derek, Scott, Lydia – *everyone* that Isaac cares about.

But it’s different for Derek. Peter is his family and he *forgot* him. Isaac doesn’t have to stretch his imagination to know what that’s like. He still has the experience of *The Dread Doctors* in his arsenal. If anything, this is just a more extreme version of those resurfaced memories. And

it makes it harder for Derek to stay mad. Because, before, his anger was justified, but there was also an unspoken understanding that it likely wouldn't last forever. Time was more guaranteed when they first locked Peter in Eichen House. But, now? Now, time isn't a luxury they have anymore.

So, yeah, Isaac knows that Derek is there for Argent *and* Peter. But, still, Derek doesn't bring up his uncle because he knows how Isaac feels. And, if he did, Isaac would be obligated to make a statement of warning and caution, bound by some responsibility as Derek's closest confidant and his truest family. Clearly, Derek doesn't want to hear that from him, so Isaac keeps it all to himself. Just says, "Okay. I'll see you later?"

"*See you later,*" Derek agrees.

They could take two cars, but nobody really wants to split up, so the five of them squeeze into Lydia's sedan. Isaac ends up in the back with Scott and Allison. Scott's sitting in the middle seat. Because he's self-sacrificing like that. And also because fate is a cruel and twisted beast.

Scott sits between Allison and Isaac, a physical representation of the dilemma in Isaac's mind.

He knows now that Scott loves him. That much is apparent, that much seems *obvious* now. It's in the way Scott looks at him, with such care and affection. It's in the way he looks *after* Isaac. In the way he picks up the phone and laughs at his jokes. It's in the way he smiles at him when their eyes meet.

And, for a while, Isaac thought that was just Scott being Scott. But, now, the distinction is stark. Scott's care for Isaac is motivated by more than just his savior complex. It's motivated by a connection that runs deeper than most, deeper than any bond Isaac has ever felt.

But... Scott has loved Allison since the moment they met. Their return to each other's arms has always been an inevitability, everyone is simply waiting for *when*. Really, Isaac is more confused as to why they haven't gotten back together *yet*, why it's taking them so long. Because that's how the story is supposed to end. That's *their* happy ending.

It just sucks because it means Isaac won't get his.

Isaac doesn't mean to fall asleep, but it seems that they're *all* a little extra tired today. He wakes up when the car stops and the engine cuts. He wakes up with Scott's head on his shoulder and his cheek pressed to Scott's hair.

Isaac's heart rate spikes.

Lydia looks back at him in the rearview mirror. There's a knowing sort of glimmer in her eyes, but she doesn't say a word. She merely slides her lips into a smile and ducks out of the car, leaving Isaac with a pang of fear in his stomach and a comforting weight knocking against him.

The next person to notice is Allison. She stares at him over Scott's still sleeping form. And she doesn't have the same kindness as Lydia. In fact, something in her darkens. It's a brief moment of something haunted and cold. Then, it vanishes and she's smiling in a way that feels forced and awkward, climbing out of the car and closing the door behind her.

And then they're alone.

Isaac tips his head back against the seat-rest and exhales heavily. This is so ridiculous. The world is ending and yet Isaac is in shambles over his love life. He would honestly and very happily stay in this car all day if it meant avoiding any further human interaction. (And if he got to keep Scott pressed this close, then maybe that'd be a little bonus.)

But he can't do that. They're here for a reason. They're here for Stiles.

So, Isaac says softly, "Scott?"

Scott makes a quiet, snuffling sound, but doesn't wake. Isaac floods with a rushing wave of guilt. Scott looks so *peaceful*. Isaac doesn't want to ruin that.

(It also really doesn't help that Scott is wearing *the* dark green hoodie, the same one that Isaac had stolen from him months ago. Isaac wants to bash his head against the window. His feelings are too much, too big, too all consuming.)

"Scott?" Isaac says a little louder, jostling his shoulder beneath Scott's head. It's just a little jump of his limb. He's exceedingly careful with the jutting bones of his joint, doesn't want Scott to wake harshly.

This time, Scott stirs as he comes into consciousness. He blinks a little

blearily, sitting up from Isaac's shoulder and rubbing at his eyes in a cartoonish sort of way. Then, when he drops his hands and gets a look at Isaac, he lights with a smile and a hushed, "Hi."

Isaac smiles back at him, enjoys the last few moments of proximity, and says, "We're here."

—

As soon as they're out of the car, any and all levity falls away. The streets of Canaan are drab and gray and coated in disarray. Fallen leaves cover the road and destruction lies on either side – a destroyed fence, a shattered mailbox, torn banners. Everything seems dull and empty and...

Haunted.

"This is it," Lydia says. And, aptly, "Canaan's a ghost town."

Even still, they've come too far to turn back now. Stiles wanted them to come here. He wouldn't send them on a wild goose chase – *probably*. There is something here. There is some reason for this town being the one clue Stiles could provide.

So, they start their exploration, walking down abandoned streets and taking in the drab scenery. The town is faded and quiet, like the life and color has been drained from the ground under their feet. It's *wilted*, bare down to the bones.

"I don't hear a single heartbeat," Scott says. And he's right. There's nothing to be heard except the sound of their footsteps crunching on leaves, their own breaths and their own hearts.

"I'm not catching any scents," Malia adds.

They walk past an old red car. It's covered in dust and grime and dirt. A streetlight is collapsed on top of it, shattering the windshield and distorting the shape with its weight. But even that it is dusty too, like it fell years ago.

"I wonder why Stiles would send us here," Scott muses aloud.

Just then, the streetlight on the opposite side of the road flickers. The light burns warm and bright in the overcast contrast of the town, but it lasts only for a second. It quickly peters out and goes blank again.

Isaac spares a quick glance towards Scott. Their eyes lock in something close to dread.

Despite the apprehension all around them, they keep walking until they reach the torn banner. Except, it's not *just* torn. It's decimated. The string hangs between two trees, suspended over the street, but only scraps of the original flag remain. It's just enough to make out the word: **CANAAN**.

"This is the place I saw in the mirror," Lydia says, staring up at the hanging sign.

Silently, they fan out. There's no talk about doing it, they just splinter in their search, though no one strays too far from the group. They break up only enough to explore in a little more detail.

Scott and Isaac approach a picnic table. The wood is chipping and rotting, appearing almost a little damp in the low light of the town. But, more interesting, is the contents of its surface.

Scott picks up a hunk of metal that, upon a second glance, Isaac realizes is an old cellphone. Meanwhile, Isaac finds a newspaper. The pages are browning with age, but they're all mostly intact, surprisingly and a little impossibly, unharmed by the elements. Isaac turns the paper in his hands. The top reads with: **Canaan Courier**. And, just below that, printed smaller, is a date: **April 8, 1987**.

It's the year Camden was born.

Before Isaac can say anything about it though, there's a metallic squeak. It's coming from the carousel.

Isaac looks around at the group, finding them all staring at the source of the noise. Then, together they approach the rusting metal of the ride.

The carousel is shrouded in ivy and leaves, but not so much that Isaac can't make out the shapes of white painted horses and fading red details.

Except, as they get closer, Isaac realizes it's not all paint. Some of the crimson is blood. It's long since dried, sticking to the figures and changing the display forever, but there's a chaos to the splatters. It's not neat and careful as the paint is. It's smeared and corrupted, a disaster embedded in time.

Scott takes a step towards the carousel, up the step and onto the edge and, suddenly, there's a harsh mechanical whir. Scott jumps back and Isaac's heart seizes in his chest and he's readying himself for an attack, but then... the carousel begins to spin. The mechanical whir turns to dissonant, out of key music and grinding of gears.

"Okay, Scott, seriously? Don't touch anything else," Isaac jokes, even as he's barely managing to get his heart back into a state of calm.

Scott bares his teeth in a sheepish wince.

—

They split up again. It's under the guise of covering more ground, but Isaac knows it's really just because they're idiots.

The town almost reminds Isaac of returning to his childhood home. It feels like stepping back in time, to the last remains of something once pristine and achingly normal. Everything feels hollowed out.

It's terrifying, but not in an active way. It's an underlying trepidation, a coldness in his hands and feet. It's an ever present sinking in his stomach.

Isaac is going to slap Stiles the next time they meet.

Isaac turns around a corner, walking up the driveway of a brick home. There's a car parked under a large tree, branches hanging low and weeping with leaves. The car's windows are all intact except for the back, which is shattered clear through, creating familiar shards of glass gone blue.

Isaac steps over them with a soft crunch beneath his feet, the glass grinding to smaller pieces beneath his shoes. He takes a step past and around the car, coming closer to the house, and that's when he sees her.

Just beyond the vehicle, is Allison.

She's fallen to the hard ground of the pavement drive and her center is flooded with red, staining the floral purple of her dress. The blood is on her lips too. They're moving, mouthing over words that Isaac can't hear. There's a buzzing in his ears and cotton in his skull and a shout on his tongue.

"Allison!"

Isaac is running to her side, *trying* to get to her – to *save* her – but he covers no ground. The distance stays steadfast and constant. He sprints and pushes forward, but it's like there's a treadmill under his feet, like the ground is pushing back against him, like it's working hard to stop him, to keep him away, to let Allison die.

Isaac's vision blurs with tears and he cries and yells and whispers, "Allison. Allison! Allison."

Her eyes are closed and her gloved hand hits the pavement. The quiet thud echoes in Isaac's mind, a ricocheting repetition of horror and devastation. It grows louder and louder, the sound turning blinding and melting. He's falling into it now, sinking into the ground and into the sound and into the heart of this disaster.

Isaac doesn't understand. He doesn't know what's happening. He doesn't know how to get to her.

"Allison."

Her eyelids open, but the warm brown is gone, the whites are gone, her eyes are *gone*. There's nothing but a neon green glow shining in the empty space – the fluorescent light of a firefly.

"Isaac."

A hand lands on his shoulder and Isaac turns around faster than his body can handle. He nearly throws the hand off, already preparing to fight, teeth sharpening without his consent, but then, through the blur of tears, he sees brown eyes and a concerned frown.

Isaac scrubs the wetness from his eyes, clearing his vision. And he expects her to disappear like a ghost of delusion, but Allison stays firm and solid.

"Isaac?" she tests.

He looks back over his shoulder, but the body is gone. The neon light has gone out like a candle snuffed and smoking.

"Whatever you saw, it's not real," Allison says. "This place is... doing something to us. We – We need to find Scott."

Still a bit dazed and a lot confused, Isaac follows her lead. But, even as he does, he can't shake the feeling that the body on the pavement felt more real than the one in front of him.

Isaac hears Scott before Allison does. He has super-hearing to thank for the advantage, bringing him closer to Scott and his calls of, *“Mom!”*

“This way,” Isaac says, catching Allison’s hand and pulling her towards a white house with an open screen door.

Isaac drops his hold as they run through the entrance, following the sound of Scott’s shouts. His voice is wrecked with emotion, wet and tired and terrified. It makes Isaac’s ears feel like they’re bleeding, makes his heart feel like it’s crumbling.

Isaac gets there first, finds Scott standing on the back porch, staring out and screaming at nothing. He’s focused on a nightmare that Isaac can’t see, a twisted hallucination and a pain that feels so real.

He reaches for Scott’s wrist, cupping his hand around him, holding him delicate and gentle.

And, at once, Scott gasps. He turns on his heel, pulling back on instinct, but settling as he sees it’s only Isaac. His chest is heaving up and down, breaths panting and face paler than Isaac has ever seen it.

“It’s okay,” he says, hushed and reassuring. “Your mom’s not here. You’re okay.”

Scott looks between Isaac and the backyard, like he’s trying to reconcile reality, like he’s trying to understand. He looks disoriented. He looks lost and Isaac wants to find him, wants to tether and anchor him, wants to guide him back to here and now, back to safety.

(Isaac doesn’t really know how to do that, so he just strokes his thumb over the veins in Scott’s wrist.)

“I saw her,” Scott says, quiet and horrified. “And her head...” He’s breathless and trembling. “It looked like somebody took a bite out of her skull.”

“It wasn’t real,” Lydia’s voice comes from behind Isaac. He looks back for just a second, just long enough to get a glimpse of her and the others joining them on the porch, before he turns his attention back to Scott. He traces his eyes over the curve of his jaw, the sweat of his brow, the cold fear in his eyes.

“Yeah, but it *felt* real,” Scott argues.

“The energy here,” Lydia steps past Scott and back out into the open space of the town, “it’s causing hallucinations. We can’t stay here.”

It takes Isaac back to Motel Glen Capri. To visions of his dad that felt so real. Because they were once. It wasn’t a figment of his imagination. It was a memory.

“We can’t leave,” Scott says, following after Lydia and the rest after him. They trail through the town and back onto sidewalks as he continues, “Not until we figure out why Stiles sent us here.”

“*Who* are we going to ask? There’s no one here,” Allison fights. Her heels echo on the pavement and her voice floods with disapproval.

“We can ask him,” Malia says. She comes to an abrupt stop, pointing with a slightly shaking hand.

Isaac follows the line of her finger, towards a figure across the road, towards a young boy standing with his back turned to them.

“Hey!” Scott calls.

The kid looks at them. And then, he runs.

—

They follow the boy as he runs up to a house. It looks the same as any others on the street, just as abandoned and just as run down. Except, one of the curtains pulls back and sways with movement – with life.

Scott looks around at the group. Nobody speaks, but the feeling is clear. They have to go inside.

And so, they approach the wooden front door. Scott reaches for the knob, turning it with a click and pushing it open with a squeak of the hinges. The door is completely unlocked, which doesn’t seem all that out of place in a ghost town.

The interior, though, is a different story.

Unlike the house’s outward appearance and the surrounding abandonment, the inside is near immaculate. It’s preserved and clear and furnished. There’s no dust, no disarray, no destruction. The space looks lived in and *almost* warm.

Lydia places a soft knock on the open door, calling, "Hello?"

The five of them step inside the room at the entrance, slow and cautious and hesitant. Isaac can feel his heart speeding up in his chest. Because, although the house feels vaguely normal, there's also something achinglly *off* about it.

Lydia's words bring no response, but she tries again, speaking, "Anybody here?"

Isaac's eyes track over the room, in search of that movement from before. Or just something to point them in the right direction, something to explain why Stiles sent them here, something that can allow them to turn tail and go home.

In his visual exploration, Isaac finds that, yes, the room is furnished and full, but everything is dated. It's different from the state of the neighborhood outside, but just as frozen in time.

"Visitors?" a cheery, grating voice floats through the room. Isaac turns on a dime, finding an older woman coming towards them. She looks a little gray around the edges, just as muted as the rest of the town. "I can't believe we have visitors." She smiles and laughs, but there's an emptiness to it. "Oh, Caleb will be so happy to see you. It's been such a long time since he had anyone to play with."

The woman keeps coming closer and closer. There's something uniquely creepy about her, something disconnected and strange. Isaac can't quite place it, but he really wishes they had left this door closed.

"Oh, you must be thirsty," the woman says. She swallows thickly, "Come on in and have a seat while I get you something to drink."

She turns around and does a little half-jog away before any of them can protest. Isaac briefly considers making for the door, making a quick exit, but he knows they can't. She's the only one who could possibly help them, and, for Stiles, they have to suffer through this, they have to take that chance.

And so, they're forced to ease their way further into the house, edging towards the dining table.

"Seriously, what is with her?" Malia speaks through gritted teeth, trying to keep her volume low enough to not be heard.

Lydia exhales something shaken and shuddered. She whispers, "She's

the woman I saw in the mirror.”

Well, that can't be good.

Lenore comes into the room carrying a wooden tray laden with six glasses full of bright yellow liquid, saying, “This was my mother’s lemonade recipe. At least, as much as I can remember.” She gives another one of those shallow huffs of laughter and sets the tray in the middle of the table. “We always served it when we had friends to visit.”

In the nature of being polite, Isaac takes a glass. It’s a little warm in his hand and he eyes the drink suspiciously. He brings it up to his lips and pretends to take a sip, but doesn’t let any of its contents breach his mouth or slip down his throat. He knows better than that. In fact, if Isaac got himself killed drinking something from a stranger in a ghost town... then he would probably deserve it, probably wouldn’t even have to blame Stiles.

Lydia and Allison at least seem to be on the same page as Isaac. Lydia doesn’t touch her glass at all while Allison spins hers mindlessly, making no moves to bring it towards her mouth.

Unfortunately, Scott and Malia aren’t quite as restrained. Scott actually does take a sip – though, Isaac will give him the credit, it’s a cautiously small one. Malia, on the other hand, downs half the glass in one go. Isaac rolls his hands into fists, just to stop himself from doing something like facepalming or smacking the glass out of her hand.

When she’s done with the lemonade, Malia says, “We didn’t come here to visit. We’re looking for someone.”

“A friend of ours,” Scott clarifies. “Maybe you’ve seen him. His name is Stiles?”

It’s all fantasy at best, it’s self-deception at its finest. Isaac remembers well what Stiles had said on the radio. He said they wouldn’t be able to find him. Meaning: Stiles likely didn’t send them here to look for him. He sent them here looking for answers, for clues, for another piece in the puzzle.

“It’s been a while since *anyone* came through Canaan,” Lenore says. It’s stated in a way that conveys nonchalance and indifference, but there’s a weight to the words.

Lydia hears it too, asking, “How long?”

Lenore looks at Lydia, but doesn’t say anything. She cups two hands around her glass of lemonade and shrugs her shoulders up, something forcibly pleasant and almost confused.

Then, Malia pulls something out of her pocket. It’s a folded up, browned out scrap of paper. She reads off of it, saying, “Since April 8, 1987?”

Malia sets the paper down on the table, between herself and Lenore. And, at once, the tone of the room shifts. Any warmth drains away and everything goes cold.

“Why would you disturb those things? They don’t belong to you,” Lenore scolds. Hers is a quiet anger. There’s no yelling or eruption. There’s just the stone harshness of her voice.

“We need to know what happened,” Scott says, leaning in a little, intensity in his eyes and tone.

“There was a picnic,” Lenore says, turning her eyes onto Scott. She moves in ways that are stiff and nearly robotic. “A community party.”

“It seems like everyone left in a hurry,” Allison observes. She keeps her voice polite and casual, but she’s fishing for information just as they all are.

“People had been leaving Canaan for a long time,” Lenore says with another soft shrug. She’s trying to make it sound normal, inoffensive, regular. “That’s the day the last of them left.”

“All at once?” Scott asks, expression flitting with confusion. “They all just disappeared?”

It’s the wrong thing to say. Lenore’s anger is building now, still not quite yelling, but blooming into something mean and dangerous. “I didn’t say they *disappeared*.” The glasses shake on the table with the strength of her conviction, with, “I said they *left*.”

“Did they leave in a cloud of green smoke?” Malia asks. She’s not being confrontational, but she’s not being subtle either.

Isaac can feel the tension rising around them. The pressure is growing and they’re headed for a moment of outburst. He curls his fingers over the lip of his chair and braces himself for explosion

Lenore shoots out of her own seat, yelling, “*They just left!*”

Her voice echoes and booms throughout the room, filling the space of every cavern and crack. She shakes the walls and the floors, vibrates against Isaac’s ears and brings a dizziness to his mind. He feels like he’s spinning out. He feels woozy and uncoordinated, feels drifting and uncertain.

And, even as the shouting stops, the unease doesn’t fade. Isaac stays in the haze, the cloud over his mind and the trance locked in the gaps of his ribs.

“We didn’t mean to upset you,” Lydia’s voice breaks through the fog. She reveals herself to be unaffected by Lenore’s voice, but Isaac could’ve guessed that anyway. “We’ll go now.”

Lydia looks out at the group, making fierce eye contact and nodding towards the exit. She’s quickly pressing up and out of her seat, striding towards the wooden front door, hoping to lead them out to freedom and to safety.

They follow her without protest, stumbling through the dining room and into the living room, headed to the open door on unsteady feet and tipping balance. Isaac feels off kilter and out of focus, but he keeps going because he *longs* for fresh air. Something in him knows that stepping out of this house will right his senses and bring him back to the center.

Isaac can taste the fresh air wafting through the doorway, he can feel the tendrils of relief getting closer and nearer. But then, it’s stolen from them, pulled right out of reach as the doors slam shut and the cool breeze cuts off and disintegrates.

“No one is leaving,” Lenore says. Her chest heaves with the labor of her breaths. “No one is leaving Canaan ever again.”

—

Scott slams against the front door, twisting and tugging at the knob, but it doesn’t open easily like it did before. Now, it’s firmly locked. Now, they’re trapped.

“Scott,” Malia hisses, “open the door. You’re a werewolf.”

“I’m trying,” Scott urges. He keeps pulling on the knob and slamming his weight forward, but Isaac knows it’s not going to give. He’s been

here too many times before not to know that.

Malia looks at Lenore across the room, at the panting of her breath and the sternness of her gaze. Isaac looks at her and sees reason to cower, but Malia looks at her and sees a *challenge*.

She marches right up to the window, pulls back the curtain, and starts to *punch* the glass. Her fist slams against the panes with a dull thud. Nothing shatters or breaks, but Malia doesn't stop. She does it again and again, knuckles colliding over and over. Each time with as much success as the last.

"What the hell is wrong with this place?" Malia whispers, dropping her fist and turning towards Lenore. She doesn't pull her eyes away even as she takes a few steps back, rejoining the rest of the group at the edge of the door.

"Lenore?" Lydia tests, speaking in a tone of calm, but Isaac knows it's a facade. He can just imagine the storm of worry underneath. "Could you unlock the door please?"

"Now that you're here, you need to stay," Lenore says. Her eyes are glassy with unshed tears. "Caleb likes you."

Isaac inches a little closer to Scott, trying his very hardest not to completely panic. He knows it won't be helpful in any way if he does, but it's difficult to stay anchored with the threat of confinement bearing down.

Lydia steps towards Lenore, still faking confidence in her strides. Isaac longs to call after her, to tell her to stop, to shelter her. But he doesn't. He stays frozen as Lydia approaches, speaking in the same sickly sweet voice, "And we like him." She circles around Lenore, getting to the other side, pointedly turning her around so she's facing only Lydia, so she has her back to the rest of the pack. It's a protective move, Isaac knows. She's acting as a shield even as she keeps speaking, saying, "But we need to help our town. People are disappearing, uh—" Lydia stutters and corrects, "leaving. I mean leaving. You... could really help us."

"No one can help you," Lenore says. "If they want to leave, they're going to leave. They'll go and they'll go, and there won't be anything you can do about it."

Isaac refuses to believe that. There's always something they can do. They at least have to try.

“Come with me,” a voice sounds from behind them.

Isaac turns with a sharp shock, finding Caleb standing there, standing behind them with posture too stiff and a voice that echoes in a way that just sounds wrong. Even still, he repeats, “Come with me.”

Caleb starts to walk away, but they don’t follow him yet.

They look back at Lydia, at Lenore cleaning up the lemonade. Isaac stares at Lydia as she stares at Scott. She angles her head towards Caleb’s retreating form. She whispers, “Go.”

Isaac doesn’t want to leave her, but they don’t have much choice. They turn and follow Caleb.

—

Caleb takes them into a basement.

Isaac immediately wants to turn around and flee. He wants to march back into the front room and demand to be set free, but he doesn’t. Just as he knew that screaming and crying would never get him out of the freezer, he knows he won’t escape this punishment by begging. So he only follows Scott down the steps and onto wet ground, onto carpet beneath water and the squishy squelch of every step.

Scott immediately starts searching for an exit, but Isaac doesn’t. He simply watches as Scott fits his fingers into the hinges of the high windows along the top of the walls. They don’t open or release and Isaac isn’t surprised. He’s resigned to it, in that quietly hopeless way of his.

“Caleb,” Scott says, turning to the boy, “can you help us find a way out of here?”

Caleb doesn’t speak. He shows no signs of hearing Scott. He steps back, towards the TV pressed against the far wall. It’s buzzing with static, screen showing that telltale display of black and white and gray. It reminds Isaac of the early years of his childhood, but, as expected, that’s not really much of a good thing.

Isaac’s nerves feel like they’re on fire, buzzing with the same static as the screen.

Caleb puts a VCR tape in the player. The screen crackles and the monotone colors shift into a video of the boy himself. He’s blowing

bubbles and looking just the same as he does know, if only a little brighter. He's wearing the same shirt in the video, the same teal button up. He hasn't aged a moment. And, in the corner, the screen reads with, **Aug. 12 1985.**

"You have to stay because Mommy said so," Caleb says, keeping his eyes on the television.

"No, we can't stay. We have to go home," Scott says, edging forward, dragging his hand against the wood paneling of the wall.

"This is home." The words come from Caleb, but it's Lenore's voice. It echoes deep in his chest, reverberating with sound.

Then, the door at the top of the stairs slams shut. Isaac knows it's a fruitless effort, but his instincts are faster than his logic. In an instant, he's on the door, scrambling frantically, jiggling the knob and pushing with all his weight. But, just like the door upstairs and the door of the freezer, the latch doesn't give and it doesn't open.

Now, they're trapped in a basement. They're trapped in the basement of a home in the middle of a ghost town – a town that nobody knows exists. They're trapped in the home of a woman who's been plagued by the state of loneliness.

They're trapped. In a basement.

"Isaac," Scott's voice says.

He lets go of the doorknob. Slowly, he turns to face Scott, to see the kindness in his eyes. Frozen blue meets warm brown. And Scott doesn't say anything, but he doesn't have to. He looks at Isaac with a fierceness in his gaze, a stronghold of emotions, a fire in the blaze. There's a promise there, Isaac knows. There's a promise of escape and protection and safety.

For now, Isaac buys into it. For now, he allows himself to be settled. He takes a seat at the bottom of the stairs, scuffing his feet in the pooling water below, splashing just enough to lick at the hems of his jeans.

"Scott?" Malia says, voice a whisper. "Come here for a sec?"

Scott spends one more second looking at Isaac, then turns. Isaac feels a little worse for wear with Scott's back turned to him, but, luckily, Allison comes to sit beside him on the step. She doesn't touch him, but

he can feel her presence like a wall beside him. And it should be claustrophobic, it should make Isaac's skin itch, but it doesn't. He leans against her without touching and, together, they watch Malia guide Scott's attention to the television.

"Look at the date," she says.

It's still the same as it was before. August 12th, 1985.

Then, "Uh, Caleb?" Malia asks, speaking louder now. "Do you know what year you were born?"

Caleb stands up from his chair. He turns to face them, and, suddenly, he's soaking wet. His hair is dripping, hanging over his eyebrows and dangerously close to his eyes. His clothes are plastered and sticking to his skin, must be a heavy weight on his thin, young shoulders. With water on his lips, he says, "1976."

"And when did you die?"

Caleb doesn't respond, but they all know the answer. He died in 1985. He died before the Ghost Riders came to town, before they took everyone. He's been dead for almost twenty-nine years.

The walls begin to run with water. Everywhere it can come from, it does. It streams down from the corner, pours in from the windows, and drips through cracks in the paneling. It rains in the room, hitting the already wet floor with quiet splashes growing louder as the water grows in force.

Isaac doesn't want to, but he presses to his feet. He's almost whispering when he says, "Am I having another hallucination?"

He knows he's not, though. Because if it was his hallucination, if it was his mind playing tricks on him, it would be sand filling the space.

"If you are, I'm having the same one," Scott answers.

Isaac steps up beside him, but immediately almost falls back again as he hears Lydia scream. It's a garbled echo of syllables, forming the shape of a word that can't be discerned through the basement waterfall and the distance between them, but that feels familiar nonetheless – like Isaac has heard it before.

Scott must hear it too because he says, "We've gotta get out of here."

“I know you won’t beat an eight-year-old’s ass,” Malia says, looking at Scott, “but I will.”

Then, she makes a lunge towards Caleb. Her arms reach out and her body is aiming forward, but, just as she’s about to reach him, she stops. A startled grunt sounds in the back of her throat, and then Malia is reaching up and up. She holds her hands around her neck, mouth open and gaping. She’s choking, Isaac realizes, as she gasps with startled sounds, falling to her knees.

“You don’t look so good,” Caleb says. There’s a sinister air around him, swirling and threatening and overbearing with its weight. “Maybe you should sit down.”

Water pours from Malia’s mouth.

Scott runs to Malia while Isaac runs for the door. He’s planning another attempted escape, mind reeling with survival and trauma. He’s reaching for the doorknob with a hand decorated with claws. But then, he’s choking too.

It comes out of nowhere. One second, he’s breathing fine, and, the next, he’s straining and wheezing. It’s not like the sand from his nightmares. The sand is drying and burns and hurts, but this is wet and fluid and leaking from his lips. The water feels like a solid force inside his lungs, in his windpipe and on his tongue. This is real and suffocating and *killing*.

Isaac tips towards the floor as his mind goes fuzzy.

And, for some reason, in his dying moment, all Isaac can really think of is Matt Daehler. All he can think of is the kid that killed his father. All he can think of is him drowning – not once, but twice.

He was just a kid the first time. He just wanted to trade for Isaac’s first edition Batman. And all he can think of is Matt Daehler trapped under the surface of the pool where Isaac learned to swim, surrounded by people who didn’t notice or didn’t care. All Isaac can think of is how scared he must have been.

Because Isaac is terrified. He’s faced death more times than he can count, and yet this is petrifying. And yet, this is frozen fear and shaking limbs. This is coughing and choking and *drowning*.

The water is everywhere and, like the door of this basement and the one upstairs and the freezer’s lid, there’s no give. There’s no relief and

there's no escape. This is claustrophobia from the inside out. This is being trapped within his own skin, within his own body. This is—

“Isaac!”

Scott is shouting as he stretches out a hand, scrabbling through the air to reach him. But their bodies never meet. Scott falls to the floor beside him, crashing to his knees in a splashing of water. And it's in his mouth now too, water pooling on his bottom lip and beading at the corners.

Scott gasps, “What are you doing to us?”

“You’re drowning just like me. Now we can be friends forever.”

Caleb's voice runs right over Isaac. He can't hear him. All he can hear is the sound of his own choking, of *Scott's* choking. Water runs over Isaac's chin and down his throat, down his neck. It's smooth and softer than sand, but just as all consuming, just as destroying. It's everywhere and it's inescapable.

Isaac is dying and Scott is too.

Isaac's lungs are burning and spasming. He feels like he's made of water, like his brain has gone to liquid and his body is heading that way too. His fingers don't feel real anymore. He feels like he's melting, like he's drifting with the tide, like he's disappearing.

And then, just as quickly as it started, the choking stops.

The water fades from Isaac's lungs and his limbs solidify and... he can *breathe* again.

Relief spreads through him like a wildfire, drying him out and filling him with fever and sunshine and oxygen. Like a breeze rippling through him, he catches his breath and steadies his lungs. His heart still feels like it's dripping, still doesn't quite feel like himself, but he's coming back to it now.

“Are you okay?” Scott asks. He's still coughing a little, still hasn't even settled himself before he's turning on Isaac, before he's ensuring his safety. His hand is on Isaac's wrist, holding him and feeling his pulse. It's protective and that last bit that Isaac needs to push him out of drowning and into life, into reality and spring air and cozy warmth.

Isaac doesn't answer, simply echoes, “Are *you* okay?”

Scott gives the smallest of nods. He squeezes with his fingers, pressing a silent answer into Isaac's skin. The pad of his thumb is a little rough, but his touch is so gentle.

Isaac has to force himself to break their gaze, to look around, to see what happened.

Malia is similarly panting and coming back to herself, but Allison is standing there like they didn't just almost die. Her skin is fully dry and her composure is unruffled and unfazed.

"Mommy says you can go now," Caleb reports, attention turned back to the television, acting similarly to Allison – as if nothing just happened.

The joy of freedom takes over Isaac's system. His traces of doubt and the registering of something strange go cloudy and then vanish in the wind. He goes slack and unthinking with respite.

Then, to punctuate Caleb's statement, the basement door comes open. They don't wait around to see if Lenore will change her mind. Scott helps Isaac up to his feet and then the four of them are rushing up the steps and towards the front door.

It's open too.

Lydia waits for them just outside the house and they run to join her. The fresh air hits Isaac like a cure, just as he expected it too. It washes over him like salvation, like a solace and a comfort.

"Let's get out of here," Scott says, jogging past Lydia and towards the street.

"Yeah, absolutely," Malia agrees.

But Lydia doesn't move. She doesn't follow them, not yet. She turns to Lenore who stands in the doorway with a manufactured son, and says, "You know, you can still come with us."

"I couldn't leave Caleb," Lenore says.

"Lenore, you know he's not real," Lydia says with paint strokes of pity in her tone.

Lenore looks down at the ghost of her son. He's pale and sickly, looking gray around the edges. But her expression is nothing but

fondness. She repeats, “I couldn’t leave Caleb.”

She looks up at Lydia. Then, pointedly, she cuts her eyes towards Allison.

—

It’s dark on the drive home. The car is tense with everything they just went through, everything they just experienced, every way they just almost died. There’s no peaceful naps or easy, human dilemmas. There’s only terror and the next supernatural disaster, the one looming up above.

“You guys think Stiles sent us there to warn us?” Isaac prompts, finally giving word to the thought that’s been crowding his mind. “Like, maybe Beacon Hills is going to be the next ghost town?”

“If we don’t stop it, yes,” Malia says, momentarily meeting Isaac’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “We need to get them to leave. Now.”

“We can’t,” Lydia says quickly. “Not yet.”

As usual, Lydia knows before the rest of them. She has some special connection to everything that just happened. And she knows what’s coming before the rest of them do, she knows what Stiles really sent them there to find out.

(And Isaac isn’t jealous. Not in the least bit. Because there’s a burden in being the one to always know, there’s a curse in the blessing.)

“Why can’t we get rid of them?” Scott asks, leaning his body weight forward just a hare and watching Lydia with a grave sort of curiosity.

“Because I saw what happens to the people they’ve taken when they leave,” Lydia says, vague and not very helpful.

“Do they all die?” Malia guesses.

“No. It’s something worse than death.” *Because, of course, it is.* “I felt it in Lenore’s memory. It’s like... their souls hollowed out. They became something else. I think,” Lydia hums and haws around it for a moment, hesitates before, “they *became* Ghost Riders. And then... they were gone.”

One thought sings out louder than the rest, echoing in Isaac’s mind with a resounding: they can’t let that happen to Stiles.

—

Lydia's brakes squeak as they pull up at the McCall house. The five of them pile out of the car together, but they don't all go into the house together. Allison and Lydia linger outside for a little bit, taking a moment to decompress. Isaac's pretty sure it's more for Lydia than Allison, like Allison is staying back only to comfort her and check in.

The others – Isaac, Scott, and Malia – walk up to the front porch and right towards the door, giving the girls space and not crowding the pair.

Scott stops right at the entrance. Isaac and Malia are just behind him, looking over his shoulder as Scott seems to turn to stone in front of them, blocking their path and sparking panic in their hearts. Or, in *Isaac's heart*, at least.

Isaac stares through the dark of the house to the kitchen island where most of the younger pack members are gathered. Except, it's not just them. They're not alone.

"Somehow, I don't think we're going to hug this out," Theo says.

Malia is growling and flicking out her claws, but Isaac doesn't even wait long enough to posture. He goes straight in for an attack, fully human in his features as he charges without thinking or hesitation. He slams Theo into the fridge with blunt nails dancing at the edge of his throat. Isaac's anger bubbles up and then his eyes burn sulfur, the only evidence of the wolf within, of the monster clawing up to the surface and whining to be unleashed, to be allowed to spill blood and drink it up.

Theo smirks, "I see you're still upset about the whole... killing Scott thing."

Isaac tightens his grip on Theo's throat, enough to restrict his breathing, enough to create crescent moon indents with the bite of his nails.

And then, Scott's hand is wrapped around Isaac's forearm. It's not a punishing or searing grip. It's gentle in its firmness. It's grounding. It's not pulling back or yanking. It's just holding, just tethering, just anchoring.

Isaac huffs a frustrated puff of breath, but releases Theo without a fight. He drops his hand from his neck and lets his eyes fade back to

blue in his backwards steps, away from the fridge and away from the anger.

Theo looks beyond Isaac, past his shoulder to where Lydia and Allison have since joined them inside the house.

“Who is she?” Theo asks. He’s staring right at Allison without an ounce of recognition in his gaze.

“Huh?” Scott makes a soft noise of confusion at the back of his throat. He shakes his head, squinting, and says, “That’s – That’s Allison.”

“What are you talking about?” Theo frowns, brows drawn together. He flicks his eyes to Scott, meeting them with an uncharacteristic level of sincerity. “Allison’s supposed to be dead.”

Heartless

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 7

Word count: 7,725

“What are *you* talking about? She’s standing right there,” Scott fires back. There’s anger tinting his tone now, but he doesn’t act on it. He stays rooted at Isaac’s side. Isaac can’t decide if Scott is trying to protect him or keep him from lashing out again. He doesn’t really mind either way.

Allison doesn’t waver under the accusation, simply scoffs and says, “Actually, *you’re* the one that’s supposed to be dead.”

“Don’t worry,” Malia says, canines still protruding from her gums, marring her voice with the faintest of lisps. “I can fix that.”

Then, she lunges at Theo. She’s faster than any of them can stop, and, in an instant, she has him on the ground, straddling over his legs and repeatedly punching him in the face. Isaac hears a sick crunch of his nose snapping, smells the rush of tangy copper blood. (And he tries not to revel in it.)

Isaac doesn’t move an inch, but neither does Scott. He keeps his hand on Isaac’s arm, effectively holding *both* of them back. Because, in all that he has done, Theo has somehow escaped any real reaction from Scott. But, this? This is a line too far. This is Scott’s tipping point, the axis that he can’t quite balance on.

Theo has his eyes closed. His body jolts with each collision, each subsequent blow, but he doesn’t fight back. He just takes the beating, speaking low and even, “It’s okay. You don’t have to stop.”

Something in those words makes Isaac want to flinch.

Malia’s claws pop out. They make a sharp, scraping sound as they slide into place. And that catches Theo’s attention. His eyes dart open, widening as he stares at the weapon, almost shocked or surprised by the development. Malia sneers down at him, drawing pleasure from his fear, and, through a fanged grin, she drawls, “Trust me... I won’t.”

Scott still doesn’t let go of Isaac, still doesn’t go to her, but he snaps,

“Malia. Enough.”

It's Liam that acts. He reaches out and grabs Malia's wrist, holding her claws back and away from Theo's face. Malia struggles against him, but allows herself to be tugged off and to her feet.

Isaac still kind of wants to rip Theo's throat out with his teeth, but he also feels a little stunned still. Scott could let go and he probably wouldn't charge or attack. He feels stuck in the shock of Theo's return and the throbbing of his accusation, like a pulse point in his ears.

“Slow down, okay?” Scott says. His grip on Isaac loosens, but doesn't fall away yet. It's anchoring, tethering, connecting. “He's going back in the ground.”

“You can't,” Liam counters. He takes a step towards Scott, small and halfway aborted. Then, “He remembers Stiles.”

Isaac blanches.

Theo winces as he starts to push himself up from the ground. He's got rivulets of blood beneath his nose and he squints his eyes closed, likely feeling dizzy with the onslaught of pain and motion. He makes it into a seated position and then stops there, slumping back against the fridge.

Scott watches him. His expression ripples with consideration.

Malia's doesn't. She immediately jumps in with a tirade of, “*Scott remembers Stiles. Lydia remembers Stiles. Isaac and I remember Stiles.*”

Which is true, but only vaguely. They remember, but not fully.

“The Dread Doctors knew all about the Wild Hunt,” Liam says. He's still speaking mostly to Scott, but his eyes flick to Malia every few seconds, like he's wary of her now, like he's worried she's going to attack again. (And, well, it's not unfounded.) “He can help us.”

“*Or* he could *kill* us,” Scott says. He starts to close the distance between himself and Liam, and that means dropping Isaac's arm. But, as he does, his hand stretches out behind him, like he's still reaching for Isaac, like he's still trailing for his touch.

Isaac steps after him. He stands between Scott and Theo, between murdered and murderer.

Because Scott is right. Theo *could* kill them. He's done it before. He killed Scott and that was enough to kill Isaac, to destroy him right on the spot. Isaac can't go through that again. He can't. He won't.

"He's my responsibility," Liam says, nearly whispers. Isaac watches as a strange sort of feeling flickers across Scott's features, something like shock, but softer. "Noshiko gave *me* the sword."

And, of course, this comes back to Noshiko. Of course, she was involved. Of course, she abandoned them with the aftermath of her stupid choices.

"It's so awkward when Mom and Dad fight," Theo murmurs, mocking and annoying and still just as infuriating as ever.

Simultaneously, Malia and Isaac both snap, "Shut up!"

Theo does, but not without smirking in an overly smug way. Isaac struggles to suppress a growl.

"You both are right," Hayden says, approaching the assembling circle. "If Theo tries anything, we'll send him back to the skinwalkers. But for right *now*..."

"He goes back now," Scott says. He enunciates every word and syllable, staccato and stern in his decision.

And Isaac knows this is personal for Scott. Theo is his greatest loss, his greatest mistake, his greatest failure. Scott started to overcome that self-blame and fear when he used Deucalion to trick Theo, when they put him in the ground. But if Theo comes back... if they let him return...

Then they risk another loss, another mistake, another failure.

"Except Liam's the one with the sword," Theo grumbles.

This time, they all shout, "Shut up!"

Scott lightly snags Liam's wrist, guiding him out of the kitchen and over to the living room. He moves them out of Theo's sight and out of the opinions of the rest of the present pack members.

Isaac's not sure if he should, if he's allowed, but he follows them anyway.

It might be a slight invasion of privacy, but it's better than the

potential bloodshed of staying in Theo's general vicinity. Isaac feels more grounded at Scott's side, doesn't want to let him out of his field of vision, not yet.

Luckily, Scott doesn't look surprised or bothered to have Isaac join them. (Liam frowns at him just a little, but it doesn't feel pointed. It feels like a general emotion, a general frustration. He's not necessarily frowning *at* Isaac, just near him.)

"You don't trust me?" Liam asks. He doesn't sound angry or surprised. He sounds resigned and a little testing. Maybe hurt, underneath it all.

"I don't trust *him*," Scott says with zero hesitation. Because he's not the type to hold a grudge, not against someone who has tried time and time again to prove their worth to him. Scott has long since moved on from Liam's involvement in the events of the supermoon. He's long since forgiven him for everything he did under Theo's manipulation. And, a little nervous, he asks, "Do you?"

"No," Liam says, quickly reassuring. "But... I think we could use him."

"Remember who he is," Scott says, arms jutting out a little, just for emphasis. "He got into your head and you *tried* to kill me." He ducks his head to meet Liam's eyes when he tries to turn away. He's not being cruel or unfair. He's concerned and honest. "And when that didn't work, he *did* kill me. And Tracy, and Josh, and... his sister."

Scott's eyes flick in Isaac's direction. It's only a second, too fast for Isaac to make eye contact, but he bristles under the attention anyway. He bristles under the reminder of what Theo did. The unspeakable act that Isaac can't fathom or understand. He can't think about it for too long. It makes his head spin and his lungs ache. It makes his blood turn to bile and his heart turn to stone.

"But this might be our only chance to get Stiles back," Liam says. He stays calm even under the emotional toll of the conversation, of the situation, of the clashing opinions.

"Can't we just try to find somebody that we at least trust?" Scott suggests.

He's being overly optimistic. They don't have the time or the resources for a commodity like trust. They're running out of options. Scott might be right about the risk in joining forces with Theo, but Liam is also right about the risk in letting this opportunity go.

One risk is known and the other is unknown...

"This *might* be a mistake," Liam concedes, "but you don't know that yet."

Scott seems to take a figurative step back, seems to be considering a little more honestly now.

Liam adds, "And you made mistakes when you were learning to be an alpha."

He's asking Scott to give him a chance, to give him the space to mess up and try again. He's asking for a shot.

"Yeah. I made *a lot*," Scott says. His eyes dart to Isaac again (and he's not entirely sure what Scott's thinking about, but he gives him a sympathetic smile anyway). Scott swallows and sighs, like he wants to give Liam this, but *can't*. "But we don't have time for mistakes." He drops his head for a moment as the reality hits, the fear and the emotion and the desperation. He looks up again, says softly, "I can't lose Stiles."

"So we should try *anything* we can to save him," Liam whispers. "Right?"

And with that, Isaac knows Liam has won.

Scott settles. His shoulders drop and his eyebrows even out. He blinks a little heavily and says, "Convince me."

—

Liam and Theo stand in the McCall house kitchen. There's a foot of space and a sword between them. It's held in Liam's hand like a threat as he says, "I can put you back in the ground anytime."

Theo looks between Liam and the sword. With his eyes pinned to the blade, he sighs and says, "You also need a transformer that can handle five billion joules of electricity."

Liam lowers the sword, dropping it to his side. It looks a little awkward in his grip, like he doesn't quite know how to hold it, like he doesn't quite know how to wield so much power.

"I know where to find one," Theo says. He shrugs, trying to appear non-dangerous. "I can show you how it works." He looks beyond

Liam, to the rest of the pack, “I’ll tell you. If Malia and Isaac promise not to kill me.”

In an instant, there’s a rumbling growl in Malia’s throat. Her lips are glued shut, but her chin tilts down and she’s look at Theo with a snarling, murderous glint.

Isaac doesn’t have the same reaction. He stays still and quiet – assessing. He never had any plans of killing Theo. Because, as much as he might want to, he knows better. He knows the toll murder takes on a person, regardless of justification. And Theo isn’t worth it. Isaac doesn’t want to be violent. He doesn’t want to turn into his father, into a monster, into a killer.

He doesn’t want to kill Theo, but he would though. If it came down to it, if he came at Scott again, Isaac *would* do it.

But...

But Scott is looking at Isaac. Isaac doesn’t turn to see him, but he can feel his brown eyes pinned to the side of his face, his jaw, his cheek.

Isaac sighs, gives a noncommittal sort of, “Yeah, whatever.”

Liam doesn’t look back at the group. He keeps his eyes on Theo and his demeanor clear cut and firm. He says, “They promise.”

“No, I don’t,” Malia barks at once. She turns on Scott, volume dipping a little, “We’re really gonna do this? Trust *him*?”

“You got a better idea?” Hayden questions.

Malia looks from her to Theo. She speaks, as if he’s not even in the room, “I’ve got an idea,” she admits. “It might not be *better*, but at least it’s not him.”

Malia crosses her arms over her chest and makes for the door.

“Wait,” Isaac calls out to her. He hears the implication in her voice, knows it can only mean one thing. It’s obvious. It’s their only other connection to the Hunt. And, unfortunately, it comes with an equally untrustworthy former foe.

Malia stops. She doesn’t turn around, but she looks over her shoulder.

Isaac doesn’t want to give too much away. They might be letting Theo help, but information is a weapon. Isaac isn’t giving him anymore

ammunition. So, he just says, “Derek is still there.” (Scott makes a soft sound of recognition.) “He can help.”

Malia nods. Then, she walks out the door and nobody stops her.

—

Liam, Hayden, and Theo are the next to leave. Scott walks them out onto the porch. His voice carries easily through the screen door of the kitchen and Isaac listens as he says, *“For once, Theo, don’t lie to me. Did you mean what you said about Allison?”*

Isaac stands at the kitchen island with Lydia directly across from him. Their eyes lock in a joint feeling of dread and the beginning pulses of epiphany.

Allison is supposed to be dead.

She’s standing there too. She’s standing at the head of the table, right by Isaac and right by Lydia. She’s standing right there, but it’s not proof of life. Not anymore, not after what they witnessed in Canaan.

Isaac is thinking about Caleb. And he knows Lydia is doing the same.

“Scott...” Theo’s voice comes heavy and, possibly, genuine. *“The one killed her.”*

And then, the hallucination flashes in Isaac’s mind. Allison’s middle coated in blood, the purple fabric of her dress sticking to the wound. Allison’s lips painted with red, her mouth forming silent words. Allison’s hand hitting the ground, her gloved fingers going limp and still.

Her eyes opening, the harsh shine of fluorescent chartreuse, neon lime, firefly green.

The screen door squeaks as Scott returns to the kitchen. He pauses just beyond the doorway, staring at Allison.

“You’re not real,” Scott whispers.

It’s a quieter revelation than Isaac would have expected. He was preparing for clawing shouts and echoing sobs and burning desperation. It’s all there, but it’s simmering under the surface. It’s a muted devastation of grief already experienced.

“What are you talking about? Of *course* I’m real,” Allison says. She

takes a step forward, but Scott takes one back. “Scott,” she says, emotion rich in her voice, pleading almost. “Scott, I’m right here.”

It all becomes so obvious so quickly. The ring daggers, the disconnected phone, the lies. Every feeling of *wrong*. It all slots into place.

Allison isn’t real.

Lenore conjured Caleb with the strength of her pain. She filled the void left by the Wild Hunt. She filled it with the ghost of her dead son, her son killed before the attack of the Ghost Riders.

“We made you real,” Lydia says. “We – We couldn’t cope with the loss of Stiles, so we created *you*.”

Allison whirls on Lydia. There’s a building storm around her, a flurry of anger and defense. Her skin is going pale and gray, her hair frizzy and too long. She’s shifting before their eyes, she’s tainting and darkening.

Isaac doesn’t want to see it. He doesn’t want this to go on any longer. He doesn’t want to break her memory.

“*Allison*,” Isaac whispers, voice cracking on the second syllable. It catches in his throat, grainy and rough.

She turns to face him. Her eyes are brown and not green, but they’re... dull, empty, *hollow*.

Isaac looks at Allison and he knows. It’s not really her. It never was and it never will be.

Because Allison has been dead for nineteen months.

She’s been dead for over a year. They’ve mourned and grieved her. She’s gone and she’s not coming back. The ghost that stands in Scott’s kitchen... she isn’t real. She’s just an illusion, just a manifestation of the toll of loss. She’s just empty space filling an even emptier void.

And yet, Isaac looks at Allison and he pulls her into his arms.

He holds her close to his chest, cradling her like he’s longed to do since the first. He allows himself one last hug, one last moment of not-goodbye. He allows himself the moment he never got. Even if it isn’t real, he lets himself have it anyway.

He imagines that hug in the living room, the light of Allison's smile, the tenderness of her gaze. He imagines every point of contact, every experience with her present. Isaac imagines that this is Allison and this is his goodbye. He imagines that this is real.

And, with every passing second, her weight starts to dissipate. They stop believing in her and she stops existing. She fades and fades and fades. Until there's nothing left.

Isaac's arms fall to his sides – empty, *hollow*. But they don't stay that way for long.

Scott is there in an instant, wrapping Isaac up, embracing him with strong arms and a gentle heart. He takes over Isaac's senses, crowds his views and his space. He closes every crack and mends every break. He heals and presses and warms.

Isaac thinks he might be crying a little bit. Because this is where he's meant to be. He's in the arms of his first love. The first person he's ever loved. The person he'll always love.

Scott McCall.

—

The kitchen is silent.

It's shock, Isaac is sure. None of them know how to move forward after this. It's like a heavy weight on their shoulders, pressing them to the floor and keeping them there.

Allison is gone again.

And it hurts – it hurts so bad – but it's different this time. It's less overwhelming than the first. It's painful, sure, but it's almost... bittersweet.

Because Isaac got to hug her. He got to share in her space one last time. He got to spend another two months with Allison in his life. And none of it was real, but it was real to him. He saw her and touched her and smiled with her. How can that not be real?

But, now, she's gone again. And they have to move forward.

"Someone has to tell Argent," Scott says, but he means, *I have to tell him*.

Isaac shakes his head. Air drifts over his cheeks, cooling the still wetness of his tears. He wants to wipe them away, but he doesn't. Not yet. He holds onto the last remnants of Allison, just for a few moments more. "I don't think he knows she came back."

"What?" Lydia speaks.

She's been eerily quiet since they got back to the McCall house. Isaac thinks that maybe she already knew about Allison, that she figured it out first, but held onto the lie for their sake.

"The night Argent ended up in the hospital," Isaac starts, "Allison showed up as Derek and I were leaving. She was – was insistent that she go in alone." He rubs at the back of his neck, "Then, the next day, she said Argent was doing better. But we know that wasn't true."

Scott's eyes fall on Isaac, realization registering. "She never actually went in."

Isaac nods.

Lydia hums. "Are you sure?"

"Not completely, but..." Isaac pauses. He takes a moment to piece his words together, "If Argent starts looking for Allison, then, of course, we'll tell him. But if he doesn't..."

"Then we'll only be causing more harm by bringing it up," Lydia fills in the blank.

Isaac nods again. "For once, I – I think it's better if he *doesn't* know."

And that brings a sad, but fond smile to Scott and Lydia's expressions. They nod in tandem, agreeing with the decision.

The room goes hushed once more. It's a little suffocating, in that way that silence often is. It feels like a noose around Isaac's throat. So, of course, Scott breaks it. Of course, he sets Isaac free.

"So. What now?" he asks.

Isaac turns to look at Lydia. It feels unfair to do, but he has no idea what the answer is. He has no idea how they're supposed to carry on after what just happened. He has no idea how to move forward when he can still smell Allison's perfume.

Lydia reaches out and puts a hand over each of theirs, comforting and

soft. “Now... we do that the real Allison would want us to do.”

What she died doing.

Scott whispers, “We save Stiles.”

Isaac wipes the tears from his cheeks.

While Scott joins the others in the plan to try to catch one of the Ghost Riders, Lydia and Isaac are tasked with trying to convince Stilinski of the supernatural’s existence. Isaac feels a tug on his heart at having to separate from Scott, especially with the emotional toll still leaving him empty and numb, but he knows that this is for the best. Lydia needs support and company right now. Isaac can’t deny her that. And, besides, she’ll likely need *proof* of the supernatural and a banshee scream, while impressive, won’t really do the trick.

And so, the two of them locate a chessboard in the hall closet and cart it over to the Stilinski household. There, they find a doorway ripped through the drywall of the hallway. (Isaac thinks they might have a better shot at success than what he initially assumed.)

Stilinski doesn’t seem surprised to see them. Or, at least, he doesn’t seem surprised to see Lydia. He’s maybe a bit caught of guard by Isaac’s presence – he’s definitely remembering locking him in a jail cell – but he hides it well enough.

“Lydia...” he says with a sigh. He sounds disappointed and concerned, like they’ve already been through this before.

“I know,” she says softly. “But just... hear me out one more time. Please?”

Stilinski sighs. He runs a hand over his forehead and through his hair. “Okay.”

Stilinski doesn’t show them the discovery in the hallway, doesn’t lead them anywhere except the living room, but Lydia keeps making sideways glances towards the torn up wall. Isaac wonders if she thinks she’s being subtle about it. (She’s definitely not.)

They really should have rehearsed or come up with a better plan

because, now, there's a labeled chessboard on the coffee table and a frown across Stilinski's features.

"Werewolves?" he repeats, voice contorted with incredulous disbelief.

"We know how it sounds," Isaac says. "But I – I can prove it. I'm one of them."

(Isaac's mind is bouncing with half-formed memories. He's been here before. In some way, in some form. This is familiar. This is *deja vu*.)

Isaac shrugs off the feeling, focusing instead on the shift. He brings glowing eyes, fangs, and claws to the surface. He doesn't bring out the hair or the wrinkled brow bone. He doesn't think it's necessary, won't do more than cause a pang of panic.

Stilinski's eyes widen and he flinches, but it's a minor reaction. If anything, he just looks annoyed.

"Okay," he says simply, not giving much away. "I guess this... this explains a lot. You know, you could've saved me a lot of headaches if you told me sooner."

"We did," Lydia says. She doesn't miss a beat, comes in with firm conviction. "Stiles told you."

Stilinski heaves a dramatic sort of sigh, tipping his head back as his face tints with red. "Lydia, I told–"

"Just listen," Isaac says, cutting him off in an act of pure bravery. "Please."

Stilinski drops his head and stares at Isaac. He looks impatient, exasperated, and a little surprised. Isaac's not sure if that's because *he* was the one who interrupted, or because, as the sheriff, he isn't used to being interrupted period.

"Fine," Stilinski says. His voice goes a little cold and Isaac suppresses the urge to bolt. Instead, he twists his hands into fists and places them over his knees.

"It's called the Wild Hunt," Lydia says. And, "The Ghost Riders."

Isaac continues, "They come by storm, riding horses, and they take people."

Stilinski just keeps looking at them. His expression's not quite blank,

but it's not quite listening either. He looks confused and, again, concerned. He's looking at them like they're just kids, like they're misguided or disturbed, like they're the boy with the freezer in his basement and the girl who spent two days naked in the woods.

He meets them with pity, a feeling strong enough that he indulges, if only for a minute, "And what exactly does this have to do with me?"

"When they take people," Lydia says, "it's not like they're killed. They're... *erased*. All evidence of their existence vanishes." She swallows. "Including your memories of them."

"Well, *that's* convenient," Sheriff Stilinski says. He's less red in the face now, appearing more like he wants to bury it in his hands instead.

Lydia nods. "I know this is a lot to take in."

Isaac really wishes Stiles were here. He probably wouldn't be able to explain it any better, but he would be relentless about it, filled with so much animation that you can't help *but* believe him.

Isaac and Lydia... they don't have that spark. They're worn down and tired, losing hope and steam. They're too polite, too self-conscious, too easy to hold back.

Stilinski shakes his head. "It's not just a lot to take in, it's... madness. I—" He sighs and cuts himself off. His volume falls, "Don't you think I would know if I had a *son*?"

"Mr. Stilinski," Lydia says. For the first time, her voice goes a little tentative. "Why did you tear down the wall? Where – Where the wallpaper was?"

Stilinski doesn't answer. Quiet and close to a warning, "Maybe you're a werewolf, and maybe this Wild Hunt thing is real, but," he says, "that doesn't mean Stiles is."

He's listening. He just doesn't believe.

"I think you two should go."

Back in her car, Lydia doesn't start to cry, but it's a near thing. She backs out of the driveway and down the street, pulling over and parking on the side of the road once they're out of sight from the

Stilinski house, once there's only trees around them.

"Lydia..." Isaac says.

She shakes her head, letting it tap back against the headrest. Her chest is heaving and her eyes are damp. She stares at nothing, whispers, "I just want this to be over."

"Me too," Isaac says.

Lydia scrubs at her eyes even though no tears have fallen. It smudges her mascara just a bit, creating speckles of black along her lids and corners. Isaac doesn't mention it, simply reaches out to hold her hand. Their fingers knit together, her smaller hand protected in his.

"We're going to save him," Isaac says. "We have to. We... We..."

We can't lose Allison for nothing. We have to make it count.

"How?" Lydia asks. Her voice shatters and quivers, weak and trembling. "Isaac... h—"

Isaac's own eyes sting with emotion, with Lydia's feelings amplifying his own. He squeezes her hand. "I'm not sure, but we'll find a way. We always do."

Isaac knows it isn't true. There are plenty of people who they weren't able to save, who are gone forever. But he refuses to believe that Stiles will be one of them. Believing is the first step towards truth. Isaac isn't going to give into doubt. He *can't*.

Giving in would be so easy, but he doesn't *want* easy. He wants Stiles back. He *needs* him back. So, they're going to have to do this the hard way. It's the only way.

Lydia strokes her thumb over the back of his hand. Her nails are painted a delicate, innocent white, unmarked by color or darkness. The edge of her thumbnail catches on Isaac's skin for a fraction of a second, leaving a temporary splotch of rosy pink.

"You knew about Allison, didn't you?" The words are too dangerous for anything other than a whisper.

Lydia looks at him. Her thumb stops moving, but she doesn't let go of his hand. She says, "I knew as soon as I saw Caleb."

"And you didn't say anything?" It's not a very good question. He was

there, he *knows* Lydia said nothing. But what he really means is: *why didn't you?*

Lydia's lips tuck into line, releasing with a string of lip gloss caught between. It breaks when her words come through, "You and Scott wouldn't have believed it coming from me. And... you needed more time. You – both of you – needed to finish that story."

Isaac frowns. "What do you mean?"

Lydia smiles at him. It's sad around the edges, but kind and sweet nonetheless. "You know what I mean, Isaac."

And maybe he does, but, before the conclusion can come to full focus, his phone starts to ring with Scott's name across the screen.

"Hi," Isaac answers quickly. And, "How's it going?" It sounds casual, but it's not. It's anything but.

"Hey. Um. It's... It's going. We – We caught the Ghost Rider, but we need you to go get Parrish."

Isaac's brows furrow in confusion, but he doesn't question it. He thinks of Mason on the edge of the lacrosse field and the half-formed idea. He puts blind faith in the memory and says, "Okay. I'll be there soon."

"Thanks. See ya."

Scott hangs up and Isaac holds his phone in his hand. He looks over at Lydia, and asks, "Can you give me a ride to the station?"

—

Even as her car is positioned on the edge of the curb, set to drive off at any moment, Lydia says, "Let me come with you."

Isaac shakes his head. He doesn't get out yet, wants to make his intentions clear and known. "You need to take a breath, Lydia."

"I'm fine," she protests. Her tone is a little harsher than necessary, her eyes a little narrowed in annoyance.

Isaac doesn't give. They've been letting her carry the brunt of the burden for too long now, complicit to the pain it's causing her. "You're not. And that's okay." He dips his head to meet her eyes, going so sincere it nearly burns, "That's okay."

Lydia huffs, another noise of frustration and argument.

“I know it’s hard to let go of control, but you need this,” Isaac says quietly. “You’re not going to be any help to Stiles if you don’t get some rest.”

And it’s a little bit unfair, but it’s the truth. Lydia is running herself down to nothing. If she doesn’t let go, just for a few hours, then she’s going to burn out. She’s going to break at the pivotal moment, just when they need her the most. Because they can’t save Stiles without her. That much is clear.

Lydia sighs, “Get out of my car before I change my mind.”

Isaac grins at her, something bright and real. And she doesn’t have to listen to him. She could easily go anywhere she wants and Isaac wouldn’t be able to stop her, but he hopes she’ll go home. He hopes she’ll listen.

—

Isaac waits until Lydia has driven away to enter the station, searching for Parrish. He finds him at his desk, typing rapidly and looking focused. Isaac feels a little bit bad about disturbing him at work again, but there are lives at stake, so the feeling only goes so far.

“Jordan?” Isaac tests.

Parrish gives a little jump, surprised to see Isaac. Then, his face falls into something unamused and unwilling. Isaac’s pretty sure he’s remembering when he and Allison showed up unannounced.

“Don’t scold me yet,” Isaac says quickly. “It’s important.”

Parrish lifts his eyebrows in question.

It’s then that Isaac realizes he really should’ve gotten more information out of Scott. Because he has no idea why they need Parrish’s help, so he has no idea how to convince him to go out into the preserve.

Isaac settles on, “We need your help.”

Parrish doesn’t look at all interested. “You always need my help.”

Isaac releases a breath of laughter. “Yes, true. You’re... You’re very. Helpful.”

Parrish stares at him. There's a quizzical look in his eye, an assessment to his gaze. And, picking up on the clues more quickly than should be fair, "You have no idea why they need me, do you?"

Isaac's mouth pulls into a wince, teeth bared and sucking air through gaps. He shakes his head, at least having the decency to look sheepish and embarrassed by the whole thing.

Parrish laughs. A real, head thrown back laugh.

Isaac's grimace turns to a smile. And, following the pattern of being completely unfair, he says, "Cam would want you to help me."

Parrish presses his tongue into his cheek, jaw angling in an exasperated, but impressed kind of way. "Camden would warn me that you're a sneaky little shit when you want to be."

Isaac keeps smiling. "So, you in?"

Parrish sighs, "Yeah, yeah, yeah."

Isaac buries the urge to pump his fist in victory.

Isaac can see the Ghost Rider without Corey's aid. He's standing behind the chain link fence of the Dread Doctors' abandoned hideout, the same place they found Mason with a tube in his neck. It's Isaac's first proper look at the sunken eyes, the mouth sewn shut, and the gray, wrinkled skin. It's his first real view of a ridiculous hat and whip, a cowboy turned dark and haunted.

The fact that Isaac can see him should probably be scarier than it is. But, if Isaac is honest, he's almost *relieved*. Because this means he's marked too. It means, if the others are taken, he'll go with them. He won't be the one left behind, as he so often is.

(Isaac keeps all these thoughts to himself, of course – plans to do so forever.)

Parrish steps up to but not over the line of mountain ash. He could burn through it with ease, but he keeps his distance. He stands directly in front of the mouthless horseman. (Isaac pointedly does not think about The Mute.)

The Ghost Rider approaches the fence. His skin is carved with vertical

lines, like bark on a tree. He breathes heavy and loud, like a scuffling in his throat. He looks only at Parrish.

“That’s progress,” Theo says.

Isaac doesn’t shush him, even though he wants to. Instead, he just questions his definition of the word.

Just then, thunder rumbles overhead. It’s loud and booming and ominous. It’s a signal of the growing threat. They’re running out of time. The clouds are rolling in, bringing darkness to Beacon Hills and loss all around.

“Ask him how we get everyone back,” Liam says. Unsurprisingly, he’s the most enthusiastic, the most willing to jump feet first. After all, this was *his* plan.

“Tell us how we get everyone back,” Parrish repeats, speaking directly to the Ghost Rider.

Because this is Mason’s theory. This is how he thinks hellhounds and the Hunt are connected. He thinks Parrish can communicate with the Ghost Riders, that they can understand each other.

The Ghost Rider doesn’t talk with words. His chin tilts back and his facial features stretch and ebb as a sound pours from within. It’s a wailing sort of grumble, not dissimilar to a howl.

“What was that?”

“Did he say something?”

Parrish clenches his jaw, staring at the Ghost Rider with something close to wonder, “He said... ‘hellhound.’”

It certainly didn’t sound like ‘hellhound’, but Parrish looks so freaked out and so certain that Isaac doesn’t even think to doubt him.

Instead, Isaac glances over at Scott, a question burning in his eyes.

“Ask him again,” Scott prompts.

Parrish hesitates for a second. Then, altering the askance just slightly, “What do you want from us?”

This time, when the Ghost Rider speaks, they can all understand him. His voice comes out almost human, but it reverbs and echoes in a way

that's disorienting and wrong, "*We are the Wild Hunt. We hunt forever. Those who hunt with us hunt forever.*"

"What does that mean?" Liam asks.

"Tell us what you want," Parrish says again. He's not backing down and he's not showing any fear or discomfort. He stays determined and steady.

If he's trying to intimidate, it doesn't work. The Ghost Rider simply repeats, with a voice coming from nowhere and everywhere, "*We are the Wild Hunt. We hunt forever. Those who hunt with us hunt forever.*"

"That clarifies things," Theo snarks.

He's being sarcastic, but Isaac thinks there's a chance he could be right, in a roundabout sort of way. To Isaac, it sounds like the Ghost Rider is telling them there is no escape and there is no motive. They take people and they hunt forever and that's it.

The issue is: Isaac has no interest in giving up. They aren't going to stop until they get Stiles back.

"What do we have to do to get everyone back?" Scott asks, sounding almost like he's trying to strike a deal. He takes a tiny step closer. Isaac kind of wants to grab him and pull him back, but he doesn't. There's a line of mountain ash on the ground, hopefully containing the Ghost Rider *and* keeping Scott from doing something reckless. Isaac just has to trust it. "Do you want something from us?"

For the first time, the Ghost Rider turns away from Parrish. He looks directly at Scott. Isaac's heart drops into his stomach.

"Why's he looking at Scott?" Liam asks, a little frantic.

The Ghost Rider doesn't turn his gaze. Instead, the rest of them follow his lead. They look at Scott too.

"He figured out Scott's the alpha," Isaac says, voice a whisper of fear.

He wants to step between Scott and the Ghost Rider. The only reason he doesn't is because the mountain ash doesn't leave enough room for it.

"There must be *something* you want," Scott says. There's urgency building now. The room is thick with it, with grasping at straws and

desperate measures.

“There is only the Hunt. No one resists. No one escapes.”

Scott looks at Isaac, giving a tiny jerk of his head, “If they can’t be bargained with, we’re gonna have to fight ‘em.”

It sounds like dread, but Isaac isn’t surprised. They all knew this was mounting to something worse, to battle and bloodshed. A diplomatic resolution was always going to be a long shot.

Scott turns to the Ghost Rider. “I’m coming for my friends. I’m coming for everyone.” He takes another step closer. “I won’t stop. I’ll never stop until we get everyone back.”

The Ghost Rider doesn’t say anything to Scott. He pivots now towards Parrish, once again falling into a dialogue none of them can understand. It’s garbled and rumbling, a windy and rushing sound.

“Parrish?” Liam asks. “What’s happening?”

Parrish doesn’t answer.

“Jordan?” Isaac whispers, pulling his eyes from the Rider to the hellhound.

Parrish’s own eyes have gone blank. The color of his irises has dimmed and dull. He’s not blinking and he’s not moving. He seems... dazed. He’s in a trance.

“Scott...” Isaac warns.

But, by then, it’s too late.

Parrish’s center erupts in flame. It starts at his stomach, just a flicker of fire and warmth, but then it’s eating at his shirt, growing and expanding. The flame consumes and rises and engulfs.

It takes over until Parrish is gone and the hellhound stands before them. His eyes burn with red and he marches forward. Enchanted and dancing with flames, he steps through the mountain ash. It burns red, purple, blue.

“What is he doing?” Theo bites.

“He’s gonna set him free.”

Theo is the first to try to stop Parrish. The flame of his skin has crackled down to glowing, pulsing embers. Theo grabs at his shoulder, but winces at the heat of the holding. He calls out in pain and Parrish turns on him quickly, shoving Theo back into the wall and the corner.

Isaac spares a look towards Liam and Scott. Silent communication passes between them. Parrish is still edging forward, he's still coming for the gate.

"Jordan?" Isaac tries one more time to break through the haze, to call through to the man underneath.

Parrish only roars in response.

And so, Isaac lunges forward, knowing that the other two will follow. Isaac gets his hands on Parrish's chest. It smarts and sears and burns, but Isaac doesn't let go. He feels his skin blistering, but he presses hard and forces Parrish back and back.

Scott and Liam crowd Isaac on either side, grabbing at Parrish's arms and pushing too. Parrish continues snarling, continues pressing back. It's a constant forward surge.

"We need to do something!" Liam shouts.

"On three," Scott guides. Then, "One... two... *three!*"

As the third count hits, they plant their feet and charge. They shove with everything they have, giving Parrish all of their weight and even more. They push and push and push until he crosses over the threshold of the building. They get him out of the transformer shed and into the preserve. They keep going, past the first grove of trees and into a small clearing.

They throw Parrish's charred body to the ground, going down with him.

Isaac hits the forest floor, feels dirt caking and sticking to the burns of his hands. He winces and releases a soft whine of pain as his palms smoke and sizzle. It's a biting, stinging sensation, an itch that can't be scratched.

Even still, even burnt and breathless, Isaac maneuvers himself to look up. He watches as Parrish's back thrums with red heat, flashing in and

out and in and out. He grunts through gritted teeth, but doesn't attack.

Parrish gets to his feet and turns, staring down at them, over his shoulder with eyes a hazel green. He breathes in sharp and scared, seeming violated and wronged. He pants, "Don't follow me."

Then, before any of them can protest, Parrish turns and runs.

—

Scott reaches for Isaac's hands, turning them palms up, revealing muddied and mottled skin. Scott sucks in a breath at the sight.

Isaac wants to pull his hands away from the delicate touch of Scott's. He doesn't, merely whispers, "Yours are just as bad."

Scott shakes his head. "No." He lets go of Isaac, only to reveal his own palms. They're black with char, but he's right. The burns are less severe. "You went right for the chest." And, far too fond and quiet, "Idiot."

Isaac scoffs with a smile. "I'm fine. They'll heal soon."

Scott pouts. Honest to god pouts. Isaac wants to kiss him so badly.

"Um, guys?" Liam interrupts.

Isaac wants to punch him so badly.

"Yeah?" Scott answers, turning to his beta with concern and a little bit of guilt. Probably because Liam has tarnished hands too, probably because his focus immediately went to Isaac. (In his defense, Isaac's attention also went straight to Scott instead of Liam. Though, maybe that incriminates Isaac more than it helps Scott's image.)

"The Ghost Rider? Theo?" he lists, like they're *both* idiots. "We need to go."

—

They get back to the transformer shed just as Mason and Hayden are approaching, and, together, the five of them enter the small building.

The cage is open and the Ghost Rider is still inside, but...

He's dead.

They creep towards his body, past the broken line of mountain ash and the chain link fence. There's a hole torn in the Ghost Rider's skull and black blood pooling on the ground around him.

Someone coughs.

On cue, they turn towards the sound, towards Theo propped up in the corner of the room. He's leaning against the still faintly shining power source. There's blood on his lips and a wound across his stomach.

Surprisingly, Hayden is the first to move. She storms towards him, grabbing Theo by the collar of his jacket and forcing him to his feet. Isaac is reminded that she was distinctly affected by Theo too, another one of his resurrected guard dogs. She slams him back against the metal equipment, demanding, "What did you do?"

"It – It was Mr. Douglas," Theo stutters. He actually sounds kind of scared. There are tears in his eyes, but it could be another trick, another manipulation, another mirage. "He ate his brain."

Scott kneels to the ground, hovering over the body. The skull isn't just torn open. It's like someone has taken a bite out of his skull. And, inside, the brain is shredded and split.

"Scott was right," Liam says, sounding uniquely disappointed. Then, stronger, "I was wrong. I'm sending you back."

"It wasn't his brain," Scott murmurs. His voice is so quiet and so deep, a vibrating in his chest, a realization of, "Mr. Douglas ate his pineal gland."

Isaac looks between Scott and Theo. And he can't believe he's saying this, can't believe he's standing up for him, but, "It couldn't have been Theo. These murders have been going on for weeks."

Theo looks just as shocked at the admission as Isaac is.

(But if Isaac's going to take Theo down, if he's going to send him away, it's going to be for something justified. It's going to be for something he actually did.)

"Guys," Liam says, staring at the body now too, "his whip's gone."

Which means, Mr. Douglas probably took it. Which means, there's something bigger at play here.

By coincidence alone, Isaac and Mason's eyes meet. They're just looking around the room, just looking for clues or hints. But then, they meet and the thought forms.

"Mason..." Isaac eases, slow and tense. "Where's Corey?"

The realization comes on quick. In an instant, Mason is out the door. And, just as suddenly, Isaac is following after him. Distantly, he hears Scott's calls to *wait*, but Isaac doesn't stop and neither does Mason.

Isaac is faster, but Mason is desperate and in love. So, by that logic, it's easy for him to keep pace with a werewolf. Isaac catches Corey's scent while Mason is guided by something deeper, and, together, they sprint through the preserve and into a clearing.

They run up just in time to see Corey with a whip wound tight around his throat. He screams against the choking leather, reaching up to the tug at the force of strength. His eyes squeeze shut and he tries to break free and.

Corey disappears in a puff of green smoke.

Blitzkrieg

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 8

Word count: 8,305

Isaac tries to push Mason back, tries to get them into some form of cover, but it's too late. Mr. Douglas already has them in his sight. He's staring right at them, his eyes sharp and ringed with a sea glass green as he pulls the whip back to his side with a harsh *snap*.

Isaac knows what he has to do.

Mason is only human, and, after everything they went through to save him last semester, Isaac can't let him be taken. He just can't.

"Mason. Run."

"What? Isaac, no—" Mason's eyes are wide and a little wet, but Isaac doesn't have the time for it. He wants to stop and reassure him, wants to pull him into a hug and tell him it's going to be okay. But he doesn't have the time and he doesn't have the heart to lie.

"Get back to the others," Isaac says. And, when Mason still doesn't budge, he gives him a light shove and yells, "Go!"

Mason stumbles back a few steps, head shaking. Then, he turns his back and runs over crunching leaves and out of sight.

Isaac watches him go, but only for a second. He quickly fixes his eyes on Mr. Douglas, meeting the threat head on and without trepidation or fear.

The teacher takes a step forward. The whip plays at his side, a menacing and twisting movement. "So brave and selfless," he drawls in a thick German accent. *The Soldier*. "You will make an excellent addition to my army."

The words strike a chord in Isaac, a pang of importance, but it's fleeting. Just as quickly as it comes, it's gone. The whip flicks through the air and Isaac's mind goes empty. He focuses in on Mr. Douglas and this fight and nothing else.

Isaac goes into a full shift – claws out, fangs bared, eyes glowing. He lunges at Douglas, slipping under the thrashing of the whip. It catches on the edge of Isaac's ankle, but doesn't wrap around and doesn't pull. It's a sharp sting of pain and a hiss from Isaac's lips, but he doesn't let it deter him, simply presses forward.

He tries to get into close range combat, hoping that, without the use of the whip, Mr. Douglas will be more easily beaten. The issue is: Isaac can't get *past* the whip. Every time he makes a move, the leather comes crashing down. In front of his feet to block his path, around his wrist with a searing burn, right next to his ear with a startling *crack*.

Isaac is losing. He knows he is. His palms are still burning from the heat of Parrish's skin, dulling his movements and leaving hesitation in its wake. There are green welts littered across his skin, his heart is hammering away in his chest, and his lungs are heaving with breath. He's growing weaker and struggling to keep up while Mr. Douglas doesn't look a shred affected. He's composed and evil, sneering with smug victory. He's toying with Isaac, playing with him. It's predatory and gross and makes Isaac's skin crawl.

Then, just as the whip tears a singing hole through Isaac's shirt, cutting into the juncture of his neck, a howl sounds through the clearing. It's snarling and throaty and Isaac recognizes it at once.

Derek charges at Douglas. He uses the element of surprise to land a single blow across his sternum. Mr. Douglas omits a crying mewl of pain, but doesn't stay in the dwellings of agony for long. He quickly readjusts and splits his focus between Isaac and Derek, using the whip against them with eyes still burning like ocean foam.

Isaac doesn't know how Derek knew to be here, but he doesn't care to ask. He just feels grateful, just feels lucky to be saved.

Between the two of them, they're no closer to winning the fight, but they are closer to *surviving* it. Mr. Douglas can only aim the whip at them one at a time, so, with each hit, the non-target lunges in with clawed swipes.

It gives them a chance, but it's still a slight one.

The fight drags on with blue-green lacerations embedded in their skin and the thick scent of warm leather and faint smoke swirling in the air. It continues with hit after hit until, eventually, Mr. Douglas gets bored of them.

He could easily take them out. Isaac and Derek are both staggering and struggling, close to collapse and defeat. But Mr. Douglas just rolls up the whip and turns his back on them. He's cocky and unconcerned, doesn't worry about being attacked or followed. He just leaves them, wounded and worn down in the middle of the woods.

Isaac slumps back against a tree and Derek follows his lead. Isaac winces as every movement pulls against the multiple whip marks. None of them have healed yet. They're bright and stark and angry.

"How did you find me?" Isaac asks.

Derek huffs a breath, "I don't know. I just... I just *knew*."

And that burns more than the lashings of the leather. That feels like whiplash and shock, like being submerged in ice cold water.

Derek just knew.

He knew Isaac was being hurt and he knew how to find him. It's a connection forged between beta and former-alpha, the bond they never managed before. It feels like safety and security.

Also, Derek probably just saved Isaac's life. So. That adds fuel to the wildfire in his heart.

"Oh," Isaac says intelligently.

They should probably get up, but they can't. Mr. Douglas' attack has left them more than just weakened. It's left them poisoned. They're down for the count, at least until the healing kicks in and pushes the green from their skin.

Isaac tips his head back against the bark of the tree, staring up at the canopy of leaves and breathing heavily through his teeth.

"You okay?" Derek asks.

"He took Corey," Isaac whispers. It makes it real to say it out loud. It makes his tongue feel heavy in his mouth. "Right in front of us."

"Shit," Derek says, voice just as soft, an exhalation of reaction more than anything.

"We need to get back to Scott," Isaac says, even though he knows that

won't be happening anytime soon. There's a chance the others could come looking for them, but Isaac knows that, more than likely, they'll assume he's been taken. He made the heroic move of sacrificing himself for Mason, and now he's paying for it. (Not that he regrets it. He doesn't. Not in the slightest.)

Derek looks over at him with a weak, tired smile. It's knowing and comforting, familiar in its glimmer. He readjusts against his tree, hissing as the rough wood rubs along the cuts of the whip. He whispers, "Yeah, I don't know about that."

Isaac sighs. He bites at his lip to distract from the tickle of burning abrasions and the dark panic in his lungs.

"He's gonna be fine, Isaac," Derek says. "I mean, it's *Scott*." And, his tone tilts into something mischievous, "You could kill him and he'd bounce right back."

It's a jab at Theo and the night of the supermoon, but it doesn't rankle Isaac the way he expects it to. He simply laughs and says, "Right. Just like you, huh?"

Derek looks like he wants to elbow Isaac, but can't risk the movement and can't risk hitting one of Isaac's wounds. So, instead, he settles on rolling his eyes. He jokes along, "Yeah. Me and Scott. *Exactly* the same."

There's a heat to his words, something pointed and obvious. The implication isn't hard to spot, if only because it's forever lingering at the back of Isaac's mind, an eternal feeling that can't be shaken or ignored. He gives a warning, "Derek..."

He doesn't want to talk about this. Not ever, but especially not right now. When every sharp breath hurts and his heart feels like it's primed to explode.

Unfortunately, Derek doesn't heed the warning or get the memo.

"Listen, I was trying to be patient about it, but this is getting ridiculous, Isaac," he says. There's a hint of scolding there, but it's lighthearted at best. He keeps going, even though Isaac internally begs him to stop. He goes a little softer, a little more gentle with, "You know he loves you too, right?"

Isaac doesn't gasp. He kind of wants to, but the noise doesn't come and nor does the shock. He can feel Derek staring at the side of his

face, but he purposefully keeps his own eyes straight ahead, at the underbrush of the forest floor. “Yeah,” he whispers. “I – uh – I figured it out when we found the Jeep.”

Derek makes a noise of consideration, like maybe he wasn’t expecting that answer. “So... why haven’t you done anything about it?”

Isaac sighs again. He doesn’t know how to articulate his reasoning. He’s not sure if there even *is* a reason anymore.

He can blame it on Allison’s presence all he wants, but she’s gone now and that excuse went with her. And, besides, it was never really true, never really enough to cover the truth.

Because the thing is: Allison has been dead for nineteen months. Even when they brought her back as a phantom, it didn’t fill in those gaps. It doesn’t change the fact that Isaac and Scott have spent over a year together – growing closer – without Allison around.

And, even when she was standing among them again, Isaac could still feel it. He could feel how linked he was to Scott and the disconnect elsewhere. He just thought it was wishful thinking, his brain seeing what he wanted to see – the likes of confirmation bias. But, now, Isaac knows that what he saw was the reality, the reality of Allison’s death and his ever blooming connection to Scott.

What hurts the most, is the knowledge that Allison was only in his life for ten months, and even less when they were actually on the same side of things. She’s been gone longer than he knew her. And the same is true for Scott. He met Allison a month before Isaac did. She was in his life for less than a year. And that doesn’t make her less important than Isaac, doesn’t make their love count any less. It just makes it different.

Because the story of Scott and Allison is a whirlwind tragedy. It’s fast paced and tumultuous with a brutal ending.

But that’s not the story of Isaac and Scott. Theirs is a long love, a slowly growing blossom, a magnolia dragging branches over days and months and years. It’s different. No more or less special. Just... *different*.

Isaac and Scott were forever changed by Allison, forever affected by her part in their lives, forever missing her. But their story, the story of Isaac and Scott? It stands apart from Allison. She has no bearing on the link between them. It’s a separate entity, being, force.

So, if it's not about Allison, then why *hasn't* Isaac done anything?

Isaac doesn't know how to articulate his reasoning to Derek, doesn't know what's relevant and what isn't anymore. So, he just says, "I don't know." And, "I guess I'm scared."

"Of what?" Derek asks. He stays kind and patient, the way he always is with Isaac and the way he rarely is with anyone else. "If you know he loves you back, then what *are* you afraid of?"

Scott. Isaac is terrified of him. Scott is his worst nightmare and he loves him so endlessly.

"Losing him, mostly," Isaac says, quiet and tentative, like he's testing fate by even letting this thought see the light. "I mean, I know he won't reject me *now*, but... my future is already unsteady as it is. I don't know if it's worth the risk."

"The risk of what? Maybe breaking up in the future?" Derek prompts with curiosity and warmth.

"Yeah," Isaac says. "Or. I don't know." He sighs. He wants to run a hand through his hair or rub at the back of his neck, but moving means pain so he stays still, gives in with, "Okay, I guess I just... I don't understand how someone like *Scott* could love someone like *me*. So. I just – I worry that... one day he'll wake up and realize I'm more trouble than I'm worth. Or something."

And, if he's truly honest with himself, Isaac doesn't think he deserves Scott. And he's pretty sure he's okay with that. He's happy to have Scott as he does now, with no changes and no developments. Because even this is more than Isaac ever thought he would find. Just having Scott in his life, just having him close, could be enough. Isaac could get by, could ration it out, could survive on this alone. But, if he lost Scott, he wouldn't be able to bear it.

Derek makes a pitiful noise in the back of his throat. "I don't think you're giving Scott enough credit."

Isaac finally looks over at Derek. He feels a little offended at the accusation, merely lifts an eyebrow in silent question.

"Scott knows you, Isaac. He knows who you are and what you've been through. He might know you better than anyone else in this world. So... I think," Derek gives a little shrug, then winces and regrets it. He pauses for a moment to rub over the cut in his side. Eventually, "Scott

knows you. And that's why he loves you."

Isaac frowns, but doesn't say anything. He doesn't know *what* to say. It all sounds so simple when Derek puts it like that. He's just not convinced that it's true.

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"So, are you going to tell me who that was?" Derek asks after a while of silence. (Isaac has no idea how long it's been. He can't check the time because he's pretty sure he left his phone in Lydia's car. Or worse, lost it somewhere in the preserve. Which is the most ridiculously cruel twist of fate.)

"His name's Mr. Douglas. He works at the high school," Isaac says. His breaths are coming a little more even now, but he still feels sore and weak around the edges. "But I'm pretty sure he's the Soldier – the alpha werewolf the Dread Doctors were using to prolong their lives. And I *know* he's the one who's been eating people's pineal glands."

Derek, for his credit, doesn't have much of a reaction. Simply asks, "And he has a Ghost Rider's whip because...?"

"Because he killed the one we captured," Isaac says.

Derek exhales heavily, muttering so quietly that the words hardly exist, "*Well, that's great.*"

Isaac doesn't respond, but he agrees with the sarcasm.

Things go quite between them for a moment, both thinking hard about the new threat level and what this could mean. Isaac's fairly certain Mr. Douglas will be looking for Parrish, now that it's become clear that not only can he *communicate* with the Wild Hunt, but he can also be *controlled* by it.

Isaac can only hope that Parrish ran as far as he could as fast as he could.

"I don't get it," Derek says, breaking the silence.

"What?"

"He goes through all that trouble to get the Ghost Rider's whip, but then he doesn't send us into the Hunt? He had us completely vulnerable. It—" Derek shakes his head. "I don't think he was *trying* to

take us. I think he was trying to *kill* us.”

And Derek’s right. Mr. Douglas had them cornered and injured. He could have sent them into the Wild Hunt at any time, but he didn’t. Which doesn’t quite add up because, “He took Corey though. We – We watched him do it.”

The connection is easy to make. If Mr. Douglas *only* took Corey, then there has to be something calculated in that decision, there has to be something that makes the chimera special.

“It wasn’t an accident,” Isaac whispers, thinking out loud more than speaking to Derek directly. “It’s... There has to be a reason,” then, looking to his side, “right?”

Derek gives a short nod. The significance is becoming apparent now. And, “You said before that Corey was somehow connected to all of this, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“So, maybe Mr. Douglas knows about that,” Derek suggests, theorizing and coming towards a conclusion. “Did you find anything in your research of chameleons that could help us?”

Isaac sighs, “No.” He runs a hand through his hair. (His palms have healed up now, only evidence of the burns being the pinkness of his skin.) “No. It’s all just the basic stuff. They can turn invisible and bring people or objects with them. There was no direct link to the Hunt and never any mention of other dimensions or their ability to travel between worlds.”

Derek hums and frowns. “Okay, so, what makes Corey different?”

It hits Isaac then – the missing piece of the puzzle, the thing he hadn’t given enough thought. The whole point of his research was to find out what the *Dread Doctors* did to Corey, but, in the rising threat of the Hunt, he had lost sight of that goal. He had focused too much on legends of the past, rather than the specific circumstances of Corey’s creation.

“Corey was made by the Dread Doctors,” Isaac says. Then, “He’s not just a chameleon. He’s a *chimera*.”

Derek catches on quick. “So, whatever the second creature is–”

“That’s the answer,” Isaac cuts in, too excited to help himself. He’s actually figured something out.

Derek gives him a soft sort of smile. “But how do we find out what the second creature is?”

“Um,” Isaac says. He has to think for a moment, has to rein in the adrenaline and process the information he has with the information he needs. Then, “Well. They’re scientists, right? I mean, all the chimeras before Mason were experiments trying to perfect the formula to resurrect the Beast. So they’d – they’d have records. Wouldn’t they?”

The Dread Doctors were particular and exact in every move they made. And that kind of precision doesn’t come without intent and knowledge.

Derek nods and shrugs at the same time, “Probably. It’s worth a shot, at least.”

“To the operating theater?” Isaac asks.

Derek confirms, “To the operating theater.”

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They don’t actually leave right away. They’re healing, sure, but still stupidly injured. They have to stay and rest for at least another half hour, but it could’ve been longer, Isaac still isn’t totally sure.

But, eventually, they’re able to press up to their feet and start the trek towards the underground tunnels of Beacon Hills. Isaac feels a bit stiff and the maiming of the whip still stings with each step forward, but they don’t have time to wait any longer. Mr. Douglas is enacting his big plan right now. They’re horribly unprepared and ill-informed. They’re going to need as many minutes as they can scrape together if they want any chance at beating him.

At least they know where the operating theater is now. The tunnels are still a maze of gray and pipes, all seemingly the same and easy to get lost in, but they find their way quickly enough.

They don’t have to use the ouroboros to reveal the door because it’s already open. The operating theater has been completely abandoned by the Dread Doctors – obviously, since they’re, you know, dead – and the inside shows it.

The brick red of the tile floor is chipped and shattered in some places, pieces of paper are splayed across the ground, and, of course, there's the broken wall of the fresco. It's Isaac's first time getting a good look at it. And, while he's curious, he doesn't dwell on it for long.

Derek starts sweeping up some of the papers from the ground, collecting them on a table in the middle of the room. Meanwhile, Isaac starts searching for other records.

They're not hard to find.

Off to the side, tucked in a corner and seemingly innocuous, is a wooden box. Isaac runs his hand over the surface, bringing up a puff of dust and brushing it away. A symbol reveals itself, carved into the wood with neat and precise lines. It's a snake.

"Hey, Derek, I found something," Isaac says, picking up the box and bringing it over to the metal table. He drops it with a clatter that's a little too loud for the quiet space.

Slowly, Isaac lifts the lid.

He's not entirely sure what to expect, but, by some luck, there's leather bound journals inside. There's at least twelve of them, but probably even more.

"This is gonna take a while."

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And it does. The Dread Doctors lived for centuries. Their time in Beacon Hills is but a pin drop in the expanse of their lives and research. But Isaac and Derek are focused and determined. Enough so that, eventually, they find what they're looking for.

"I found an entry on Belasko," Derek says.

He holds out the splayed journal to Isaac, naturally handing the book over to him. Isaac takes it. He skims his eyes over the page, taking note of the torn edges of the section before. Isaac doesn't doubt it was information on Theo, has no lack of certainty that Theo purged this place of any personal observations he could find.

Isaac doesn't much care right now. He flips ahead. He moves past Tracy and Donovan and Lucas and through to *Corey Bryant*.

The issue is: the Dread Doctors were a paranoid people. Their notes are vague and barren, giving detail in tiny script and fancy words that Isaac can't really decipher. There's no clear label, no clear notation of chameleon combined with *blank*. But...

"The solution they used to transform him was part chameleon and part 'fluid from *Der Soldat's* tank'," Isaac reads off.

"And... let me guess," Derek drags, "it doesn't say what was in the tank?"

Isaac shakes his head. "No."

The two of them look down at the large pile of journals and groan with frustration.

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They go through every journal and scour every page. They leave no section unexplored. And yet, they find nothing. There are other mentions of *Der Soldat*, sure, but they're all nonspecific and nondescript. There's nothing that gives them any clarity.

"It doesn't make any sense," Isaac says. He's pacing a little. His wounds have fully healed now – after all, it has been *hours*. "I mean," he sighs, "Theo said they brought the Soldier with them everywhere. He said it was how they conquered immortality. That – That sounds pretty important to me."

Derek shakes his head. "I don't know—" He trails off into nothing. "Wait. They brought the Soldier with them everywhere they went?"

Isaac shrugs, "That's what Theo told us."

"Isaac," Derek says, a glint in his voice. "This wasn't the Dread Doctors' last location."

Isaac gapes. Derek is right. The Dread Doctors had one last pitstop before death. Before they found their final resting place, they were shackled up in the transformer shed. They brought the Soldier with them there. And, if that's their most important research, if that's what was keeping them alive, then there's no way they would travel without it.

"The research isn't here," Isaac whispers.

“But it does exist,” Derek nods.

And then, just as their mood and their hope are starting to lift, there’s a crash and heavy footfall. It’s an echo in the cavernous space of the tunnels and the operating theater, a resounding boom and a cymbal in their ears.

Isaac and Derek turn on a dime.

They find two Ghost Riders standing in the entrance of the operating theater, each with a hand on the holster of their belt, empty eye sockets and gray skin even more menacing in the low light.

Shit.

The Ghost Riders move slow but intimidating, like they have all the time in the world to attack, like they’re not at all concerned about Isaac or Derek.

One of them clicks his whip against the ground while the other pulls its gun.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Isaac,” Derek says.

Isaac doesn’t respond verbally. He doesn’t look at Derek and he doesn’t react. He simply lunges forward.

He doesn’t know what he’s doing, but he knows the weaknesses of a gun and a whip. He knows he needs to get in close, and the best way to do that is through the element of surprise.

So, he lunges forward with Derek’s call for attention as his cover.

The Ghost Rider immediately starts shooting, but Isaac grabs his wrist and twists and pulls. He forces the gun up over the Ghost Rider’s head, forcing bullets into the ceiling rather than right through his own body.

Derek drops whatever he was going to say and charges forward before the second Ghost Rider has a chance to attack. And, together, they fight tooth and nail. For survival and for information, for the advantage that could close the gap, that could save not just themselves and each other, but *everyone*.

Isaac claws and bites and kicks. He fights dirty and he fights hard.

But it's not enough.

The Ghost Rider gets the gun to his head. It's held up to his temple and Isaac knows what's about to happen. Or, well, kind of. He knows he's not going to die. He knows he's going to be sent into the Hunt. But, realistically, he doesn't really know what that means. As much research as he's done, he doesn't really feel prepared for this moment, he still feels in the dark and terrified.

Isaac makes eye contact with Derek, just for a fleeting second, then closes his eyes. He readies himself for the shot to be fired.

But it never comes.

Derek abandons the second Ghost Rider to focus on the gun. He grabs the Rider's arm, and, with a catalog of practice, he snaps the bone.

Isaac opens his eyes to the sickening crunch.

He sees Derek's hands on the arm of the Ghost Rider, sees the pooling black blood dripping onto pale skin. He sees the second Ghost Rider snapping his whip, sees it curling around Derek's ankle.

He sees Derek's green, green eyes.

Derek gives him a small smile and whispers, "Go."

Derek doesn't shout and Isaac doesn't protest. There's no saving Derek now. He knows that. He's cornered and surrounded. And, as hard as they might be able to try against the Ghost Riders, they're not going to win.

So, now, Isaac just has to make this count. He needs to make it so that Derek's sacrifice matters.

Isaac gives a tiny nod and a tiny smile.

Then, he runs.

While the Ghost Riders are distracted, Isaac runs towards the door and out into the tunnels. As much as he wants to, he doesn't look back and he doesn't pause. He hears the snapping of the whip and the cracking explosion of smoke, but it's background noise to the slapping of his feet against stone and the blood rushing in his ears.

Derek has been taken.

Isaac stumbles out of the tunnels and into the preserve. He runs until his lungs burn and he feels far enough away to be safe. (He's not. Nowhere is safe from the Ghost Riders, but it's the feeling he's searching for more than anything real. He just wants distance between them, just wants to feel secure in that.)

Then, Isaac collapses against a tree. He doesn't fall to the ground, even though he sort of wants to, just tips his weight forward and lets the bark scratch his hands. It stings a little more than it should, probably due to the sensitive fragility of newly healed skin, but Isaac welcomes the pain. It settles him into his body.

Tears prick at Isaac's eyes, but he doesn't let them fall. It feels like a silly thing to do – crying right now, when there's so much left to do, so much energy that is needed for what's to come. It's just... Derek *sacrificed* himself for Isaac. It's not the first time he's done something like this. It's not even the second and it surely won't be the last. But, still, it hurts in a unique kind of way. Like the bark of the tree, it's a welcome ache.

It's a pain of being cared for and looked after, of being protected so fiercely. It's an intimacy that Isaac hasn't had since Camden. It's a shield of Derek's body in front of his.

And it hurts.

Because Derek is gone. He's been taken so that Isaac can be free, so that he can try to save them all. So, he has to succeed.

He won't let Derek's sacrifice be in vain.

Isaac easily works his way back to the transformer shed. He's disappointed, but not surprised, to see it vacated now. All that remains of their feeble plan is the broken line of mountain ash and the body of the Ghost Rider. Isaac pointedly ignores both. Instead, he makes his way towards the basement stairs.

He hesitates at the top. He wouldn't do it if he wasn't alone. If he had the pack at his side, this would be easier. But he doesn't have them and he is alone. So he lets one, two, three seconds pass.

Then, he takes the plunge.

Isaac holds the railing as he trails down to the basement of the transformer shed. Again, he's caught off guard by the expansive space, the massive room hidden under such a tiny building.

The Soldier's tank is completely shattered, confirming Isaac's theory of Mr. Douglas' true identity.

There are shards of glass across the floor and they look a little shinier than they should, but there's no real traces of the green liquid from within. It's all been cleaned up, or, possibly, it dripped down the grates in the floor. Honestly, it doesn't really matter where it went. Isaac wasn't going to be able to identify it from sight alone anyway.

The basement is a little larger than the theater, but a little more empty too. The space is abandoned, but looks almost forever unused. It doesn't look lived in or operated from. It's dusty and dirty, but also seems *new* in a weird, should-be-impossible way.

Isaac starts to explore. The sound of his footsteps and shuddering breaths are loud in the cold, dark space. The state of his loneliness weighs on his shoulders like a burden of survival. Isaac tries to ignore it. He needs to focus and getting existential isn't going to help him save anyone.

So, he starts rummaging through the room, searching for another notebook, a piece of paper, *anything*. He overturns shelves and pulls cabinets open. He searches high and low and finds nothing and nothing and... more nothing.

Isaac lets out a low, guttural groan. He tips his head back and stares up at the ceiling. His eyes go watery again and a single tear falls, but he scrubs it away just as quickly as it comes.

He can do this. There has to be something here. There *has* to be.

Then, Isaac thinks of the ouroboros. The Dread Doctors were well concealed and hidden when they wanted to be. They found Mason here only because the Dread Doctors wanted them to find him.

The Dread Doctors wouldn't want anybody to find out the secret to their immortality.

So, Isaac needs to stop looking for the obvious. He needs to start looking for something concealed, something easily missed.

Isaac takes a step back, closer to the entrance, getting a look at the

room as a whole. He sweeps his eyes over every nook and every corner. Until they catch on an abnormality.

There are branches growing into the basement. It was something Isaac barely noticed before. It seemed like an obvious addition to the abandoned transformer shed in the middle of the woods. Of course it would be overgrown, crowded with leaves and roots, incorporated into part of the forest.

But along the far wall, there's something strange.

In the corner, there's fresh dirt and leaves more green than the rest. There's a plant growing up from the ground while the rest seem to be coming in through the ceiling.

Isaac rushes towards the plant before he can really think about it. He grabs hold of the base and tugs. The roots come free and the plant comes out of the ground. It's easier than it should be.

Isaac tosses the plant aside, focusing instead on the hole it was growing from. It's not a splintering crack or a natural shape. It's a perfect, man-made rectangle.

Isaac pauses.

Is he really going to do this?

Isaac delves his hand into the soil.

He's not sure what he's expecting. To lose his fingers, maybe.

But, instead, his hand catches on something rough and square. Isaac closes his fingers around the shape and pulls.

It's a box.

Isaac's hands are shaking so hard he almost drops it.

Quickly, he brushes dirt from its surface and pulls back the lid. Inside, there's a single bound up scroll of paper.

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The green liquid is venom from a Ghost Rider's whip. Corey is part-chameleon and part-Ghost Rider.

It explains everything.

It explains why he can see them without being taken. It explains why he can move between the two worlds. And, mixed with the powers of a chameleon, it explains why Corey can bring people with him, back and forth from realm to realm.

Corey can travel between the worlds, but he can also meld them into one.

In that moment, Isaac remembers Mr. Douglas' voice, remembers what he told him earlier – that he would make a good addition to his army. And, in an instant, it all becomes clear.

Mr. Douglas is going to use Corey to merge the worlds together. That's why he sent Corey into the Hunt, that's why he didn't try to kill him like he did Isaac and Derek. And, if Isaac is right, then he's doing all of this to grant himself an army of Ghost Riders, of soulless creatures, of unkillable killers.

If Isaac is right, then they have to stop Mr. Douglas.

It's not particularly difficult to guess where Douglas would be. If he's going to merge the worlds, then he's going to have to get through to the Hunt. And he's certainly not going to allow himself to be taken by the Ghost Riders, that would be too vulnerable for the ego of a villain like him.

So, he'll be going for the rift. He'll be looking for the place where Peter appeared, the rip in space and time, the one possible entrance.

On instinct and barely thinking, Isaac shoves the paper in his pocket and rushes back up the stairs.

Except he stops in his tracks when he sees the dead Ghost Rider.

Their plan to capture him didn't work.

Isaac gets this horrible sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. His insides go green and mossy with bile and nausea.

Scott is going to rift.

Isaac has no proof of the claim, but he knows it to be true. Their plan to capture the Ghost Rider didn't work, so they'll have to change tactics, they'll have to plan to fight them. And, to do that, they'll need the upper hand, some form of surprise, some way to get an advantage or information. The rift would be the next most logical step, the next

unturned stone. Because they don't have any other clues or discoveries. It's their only play.

Scott is going to the rift. And Isaac *knows* it's not going to end well.

—

The issue is: Isaac has no idea where the rift is. He doesn't know what it looks like or what it entails. He doesn't know how close it is to where Peter showed up in the woods. And even that isn't an exact location. It's a rough memory and a huge span of preserve.

But, even still, Isaac has to try to save Scott.

So, he runs out of the shed and into the wildlife. He starts running and he just keeps going. He sprints through his memory and over rocks and roots. He ducks under low hanging branches and skirts around thickets of bushes and trees.

He runs until he finds familiarity, until he recognizes the dip in the terrain and the pattern of the trees.

He finds himself standing in the middle of the woods.

There's nothing around. There's dirt and leaves and sticks, but there's no glowing portal or pulsing of energy. Isaac doesn't feel anything different. He feels clueless and lost and a little stupid.

Isaac scuffs his foot across the ground, lets it catch in the leaves with a crunch and a flutter as they spill up around him and fall back to the earth.

He feels hopeless.

He doesn't want to. He wants to stay energized and optimistic, but he's starting to give out and give up. He can't help it, really.

It's just that Mr. Douglas had such a huge head start.

There's no way Isaac is going to be able to stop him in time. There's no way he's going to be able to get to Scott and warn him – *save* him.

Scott is going to be taken or killed and there's nothing Isaac can do about it. It's the janitor's closet all over again. It's the same telltale tug of regret. It's being left behind and abandoned. It's a loneliness that Isaac can't stand to face.

It's equal parts regret for being too slow and for being too cowardly. It's regret for not being able to save Scott, but also for not acting when he had the chance.

Isaac knows Scott loves him. He's known for a week and he's done nothing about it. He let fear hold him back when he wasn't supposed to be doing that anymore. He let his demons win.

Isaac had Scott right where he wanted him and he blew it. He let the opportunity pass him by. He sabotaged his own happiness, as he always does. He had Scott right there and he didn't kiss him, he didn't tell him, he didn't do anything.

And, just as Isaac is sinking into the self-pity, he hears a noise.

It's the snapping of a twig. Faint and soft, but louder than anything in the stark silence of the forest. It could just be an animal or the wind or nature taking its course, but Isaac isn't taking any chances. He turns on his heel, ready for a fight, but...

It's Scott.

He's standing a few feet away, staring at Isaac with nothing short of wonder – *awe*.

He's here. He's alive. He loves him.

There's a moment where they just stand there, just looking at each other, just brown eyes locking with blue. And then, Isaac can't hold back anymore. He can't *take* it anymore. It seems that Scott can't either.

Like there's a tether between, like there's a magnet drawing them in, they rush closer until they collide. Scott's hands cup Isaac's cheeks, still with that wonder, that awe. He's reverent about it, careful and soft, as if Isaac is something delicate and fragile. Isaac's hold is a little stronger, a little firmer. It's a hand on Scott's shoulder and chest, gripping with a squeeze of reassurance. It's not harsh and hurting, it's just a give of skin beneath his fingers, the thrum of life. *Real*. Scott is real.

And then they're kissing.

With all the tension that's built up between them, with the high strung context of this moment, Isaac expects the kiss to be a little desperate and biting – brash, maybe. But, like all things with Scott, it's gentle.

They don't so much crash together as they do *click*.

Their lips meet and Isaac's mind goes fuzzy with it. He tightens his fist in Scott's hoodie, just to keep his legs from giving out. It's mild and sweet, but intense too. It's warm. Everything is so warm. It starts at Isaac's lips and floods through the rest of his being, like Scott is pouring his love into him, filling him up and up and up.

And it isn't Isaac's first kiss, but it's the first one that matters.

When Isaac kissed Erica at the rave, it was nothing more than a performance. It was a distraction. Erica was so thoroughly Boyd's and he was so thoroughly hers that it wasn't even a question that the kiss wasn't real. It was important, sure. Still Isaac's first kiss, still part of his connection to Erica, still something he holds tight to. But it was nothing like this.

This is so *real*. This. This kissing Scott. This hands cupping his jaw and lips sliding together. This standing in the forest with a symphony of birds and rustling leaves. This taste of inevitability. This moment that was always going to be. This sharing of breath and heartbeats.

This is true. This kissing Scott. This loving Scott. This is the truest thing Isaac has ever known. This, this, this.

Isaac pulls back when he starts to feel woozy. Scott lets him, but only barely. Scott lets him break the kiss, but he doesn't let him back up.

(Not that Isaac wants to. He doesn't. Not even a little bit. He wants to stand like this forever.)

Scott sweeps his thumb across Isaac's cheek. It's just a gentle stroke of the rough pad of his finger, but Isaac sags under it, yields to the touch. His eyelids feel heavy and he's warm all over. This is an intimacy he's never known.

Then, Scott smiles at him. If Isaac wasn't lightheaded before, he definitely would be now.

"I thought you were attacked by Douglas," Scott says. The wonder has invaded his voice now too.

Isaac laughs a little, can't help it. The sound bubbles up and then it won't stop. It's pure elation.

Scott pouts in his adorably confused way and Isaac kisses him again.

Because that's something he can do now. This kissing Scott thing. He keeps it brief, just a peck of their lips, just a simple indulgence, an easy joy.

Scott drops his hands from Isaac's face, no longer cradling his cheeks, but instead allowing them to drop to his shoulders. Isaac's hands fall too, down towards Scott's hips and waist.

Isaac smiles and admits, "I thought *you* were attacked by Douglas."

—

Derek wasn't the only one who was taken. The meager survivors reconvene at the McCall house. Isaac, Scott, Lydia, Malia, and Liam. The five of them are all that's left of Beacon Hills.

Isaac pulls the scroll from his pocket. He tells them about his discovery, but his heart isn't exactly in it. He tells them that Corey isn't just a chameleon, that he's part Ghost Rider too. He tells them that the Dread Doctors made him using the liquid from Mr. Douglas' vat, the venom from a Ghost Rider's whip. He tells them that's why he's connected to the Hunt, and that's why Mr. Douglas targeted him first. He tells them Douglas is going to use Corey to merge the worlds together.

Everyone's listening, Isaac can tell that much, but nobody says anything. There's not much to say. Douglas used Parrish to break through the rift and then destroyed it. There's nothing they can do from out here.

They're all that's left of Beacon Hills and they have no way of reaching everyone that's been stolen from them.

Even still, Scott keeps trying. His phone is open to a screen that reads with, **Mom**. But, with each dial, he gets the same message.

"We're sorry. The number you have reached is not in service. Please check the number or try again. This is a recording."

Scott does try again. Over and over he dials. The joy from their kiss, from their reunion, is completely gone now. He's silent and despondent. He barely moves, just presses the call button again and again.

On the fifth attempt, Isaac places his hand over Scott's, speaking over the recording with a quiet call of, "Scott."

Scott doesn't react, but Isaac doesn't give up. He leans in a little closer, ducking his chin to meet Scott's eyes. He slides his hand up Scott's arm, a hand over his bicep and a stroking thumb.

"Scott," he whispers. His voice is tight and emotional, his eyes burning with unshed tears. "Your mom is gone. But she's still alive."

Scott looks at Isaac. Isaac looks back at him.

"What do we do now?" Liam asks. He keeps his voice hushed, but there's a shred of urgency to it.

"We can't hide from them," Malia says. Meaning: it's only a matter of time before they're all taken too. All except Lydia. (And maybe that shatters Isaac more than anything, maybe that hurts more than he can handle. Because he's been the one left standing, he's felt that survivor's guilt and that plague in his heart, and he doesn't want that for Lydia, can't bear the thought of it.)

Liam shifts in his stool, and, as if he's in Isaac's mind, he suggests, "What about Lydia?" He stands, walking over to the table and referencing something Isaac wasn't there to witness, "The Ghost Rider was afraid of her."

"It wasn't fear," Lydia objects, voice soft as she finally turns away from the window. (And Lydia looks a little more rested than Isaac has seen her in weeks. He flares with a little pride in that, in the knowledge that Lydia listened and went home, that she took care of herself because Isaac asked her to.) She joins them at the table too, saying, "It was almost like... reverence."

"Doesn't matter," Scott says, dark and hopeless. Isaac's heart crumbles in his chest. "The rift is *gone*. We're the only ones left in Beacon Hills."

But then, as if a direct contradiction, there's a knock on the door. The person doesn't wait for their approval for entry, just walks inside with a creaking of the hinges and a thump of shoes against hardwood floors.

Sheriff Stilinski enters the kitchen.

Isaac watches as Scott's back straightens, just a little. Curious, more than likely. But maybe there's something more to the lift. Like, maybe it's not over yet.

"I have a son," Stilinski says. Isaac's heart pieces back together. "His name is Mieczyslaw Stilinski. But we call him Stiles." The sheriff looks from Lydia to Scott. "I remember."

Scott's eyes are wet. Isaac holds his hand. Nobody bats an eye.

"When Stiles was a little kid, he couldn't say his first name. Not sure why," he gives an empty sort of chuckle, "it pretty much rolls off the tongue. But, uh, the closest he could get," Stilinski says, "was 'mischief.'" Isaac remembers the first real clue, the automatic writing. "His mother called him that until..."

Until the day she died.

Stilinski swallows, breathing heavily. The room is thick with emotion. A swirling mixture of sympathy, sadness, and bittersweet happiness. Stilinski smiles as he talks, saying, "I remember when, uh... when Stiles first got his Jeep. It belonged to his mother. She wanted him to have it." He nods, "The first time he took a spin behind the wheel, he – he went straight into a ditch." Stilinski laughs wetly. "I gave him his first roll of duct tape that day."

Isaac chokes back a sob.

"He was always getting into trouble, but he always had a good heart. *Always.*"

Isaac aches with the truth of it.

"We're here tonight," Stilinski says, "because my goofball son decided to drag Scott, his greatest friend in the world, into the woods to see a dead body."

Stunned silent tears roll down Scott's cheeks. Isaac squeezes his hand, taking as much comfort from the action as he gives. Scott squeezes back, and, "How did you remember?"

Stilinski makes a little clicking noise, lips parting, as he steps closer to the table. Looking between Lydia and Isaac, he says, "It started with a chessboard." His smile is faint and a little apologetic. "Then, piece by piece, it all started coming back. I found the red string for his crime board. His whole room came back and... and all the *memories.*"

For a second, Stilinski goes quiet. They watch him stare down at the wood grains of the table, eyes shiny with the emotion of a son forgotten and returned.

“And then, the strangest thing happened,” Stilinski looks up, across the table at Lydia.

“What?” she asks.

“I thought I *saw* him,” Stilinski admits. “It’s like – something opened,” Stilinski splay out his hands, “right there in the middle of the room. Just for a moment. And then,” he drops his hands, “it was gone.”

“A rift,” Scott whispers.

The room goes tense with the revelation, with the knowledge that there might be another way, that they might still have a chance.

“I thought there was only one rift,” Malia says. She shakes her head, “We saw it disappear.”

Scott looks at Stilinski, a theory and a question in his statement of, “You remembered Stiles and then a new rift was created.”

“If the *sheriff* can do it...”

“Maybe *we* can.”

The adrenaline is building. The idea is forming. The hope is growing.

“But that rift closed,” Liam reminds them.

“Then we’ll open it again,” Scott says, not letting himself be talked down or his hopes be doused. Blind optimism and unrelenting faith return to their rightful spot in his chest, in his eyes, in his lead.

“How?” Stilinski asks.

“By remembering Stiles,” Scott says. His hand jumps under Isaac’s, his body tipping forward and sliding in, leaning towards the others with, “We have to remember everything.”

Memory Found

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 9

Word count: 9,377

It feels stupid to wait, but they all need a little time to rest. And they need time to come up with a way to *really* remember Stiles, they need time to figure out how to fight against the Wild Hunt's impact.

Isaac and Scott end up in the latter's room, lying side by side but barely touching, just staring at the ceiling above. It's a little tense between them, but not awkward. Maybe just... unsure.

"Should we be talking about it?" Isaac asks, speaking to the ceiling. He wants to settle the uncertainty between them, wants to scratch the itch of possibility before the fighting picks up again. They'll be stronger if they're unified. They'll be stronger together – in whatever form that takes.

"If you want to," Scott says, easy and amicable.

Isaac huffs. "I've literally never wanted to talk about anything ever."

Scott laughs. The sound comes easy too, light and breathy and open. And, just like that, any discomfort lifts. There's a bubble of joy around them now, something sacred and delicate but real.

Scott rolls over onto his side, turning to face Isaac. He moves to do the same.

They're so close to each other now. Isaac can feel every exhalation of Scott's breath, can see every shade of brown in his eyes, can count every eyelash.

Isaac quickly rolls over again, pressing to sit up with, "Yeah, no. We can't have a serious conversation like that. You're going to kill me."

Scott laughs again, but respects his decision. He sits up too, sliding over to the side of the bed. He keeps a good few inches between himself and Isaac, but makes them face each other. (Isaac thinks it would be easier to say this to the ceiling or the wall, but he *wants* to say it to Scott.)

“Um,” Isaac says. His heart is racing in his chest. It’s so unnecessary when they’ve already crossed that line, when they already know the feelings that lie between them. But that doesn’t make it any easier, to put it out there, to speak it into truth. Isaac does it anyway. Because he wants to, even as hard as it is to say, “So, I think it’s kind of obvious now, but I – uh. I more than like you.”

Isaac has a front row seat to the blossom of Scott’s smile. It starts as a sparkle in his eyes and a twitch at the corner of his mouth and then it’s spreading like a wildfire, taking over his entire face. It’s ridiculously bright and ridiculously fond. “Yeah, Iz. More than like you too.”

Isaac’s stomach clenches with the admission. He already knew that, but to hear it spoken, to hear it in the low timber of Scott’s voice, the teasing edge... it’s different. It makes Isaac’s heart flutter. He opens his mouth to say something, but there’s a cloying, honey sweetness on his tongue, thick and heavy. All he manages is a broken whisper of, “Yeah.”

Scott keeps grinning at him, but it softens a little. He’s so gentle with Isaac, so much that it almost hurts. He asks, “When did you – When did you realize?”

Isaac runs a hand through his hair, catching on a few knotted curls and pushing past the resistance even with a small bite of pain. He knew this question was coming, but he still feels embarrassed to say it. “When Theo, you know,” he dips his voice low, like it’s a secret, “killed you.”

Scott’s eyes light with a mischievous glow, smile sliding into something closer to a smirk, mouth quirking with mirth. “Why am I not surprised that it took me *literally dying* for you to figure it out?”

Isaac resists the urge to elbow Scott, if only because he looks so adoring. (It makes Isaac feel a little sick. In a good way.) Instead, he rolls his eyes and says, “Shut up.” And, “When did *you* realize?”

“Before you,” Scott says, appearing far too smug about it. Isaac nearly elbows him again, but he’s too curious to go through with it. Scott’s hands are turning together, the pad of one thumb running over the nail of the other, something a little nervous in that movement. “When we first met Corey in the hospital and you were taking his pain and knowing all about the g-girt-gir-g-”

“Girtablilu,” Isaac offers, but it comes out slow and sweet, awed and

quiet. He whispers, “That was so long ago. I...”

“Yeah,” Scott nods in agreement, like he knows exactly what Isaac is thinking. (And he probably does – that they could have been doing *this* for so much longer.) “But, you know, end of the world? Not a bad time to confess, I guess.”

Isaac laughs a little. “Right.” Then, because he’s curious, “Did you ever realize I liked you back? Or was the kiss... a risk?”

Scott tilts his head to one side. “It would’ve been a risk either way, but, uh. No. I didn’t realize, really.” His head tips in the other direction now. “Or maybe I did in the few seconds before. I don’t know.”

It’s Isaac’s turn to smirk now, to go smug around the edges, “Well, *I* figured that part out. So, how’s that for emotional intelligence?”

Scott gives a little exhalation of breath, a soft form of laughter, but Isaac can see some traces of surprise in the lift of his brows and the slight widening of his eyes. He hums and asks, “When was this?”

“When you came to the comic store,” Isaac says softly. He doesn’t say those four important words, doesn’t voice what caused the ground to shift, but he knows he doesn’t have to. Scott doesn’t say anything either. He merely smiles at him with his eyes and his lips.

Then, braver than he’s ever felt before, Isaac asks, “So... can I, like, kiss you now?”

Scott nods, but then does it for him. He scoots closer on the bed, resting his hand on Isaac’s knee for balance. He leans in and their lips touch and it’s just as magical as it was the first time. Isaac’s heart fumbles in his chest. Clumsy, stumbling into itself, one heartbeat becoming two.

Isaac and Scott pull hard on the round, steel door of the tunnel. They grunt and grind their teeth together, yanking with all their strength to pull the thick metal into place. (And Isaac wonders how Argent would ever do this on his own, wonders what kind of strength he’s been hiding behind the barrel of a gun.) Then, once the door suctions closed, Scott turns the wheel and locks them in.

Meanwhile, Malia secures the air vents and Lydia comes sprinting up

the hall saying, "The tunnel gate's locked." She gets inside the bunker and Scott shuts the door fast behind her. She pants, "Everything's locked."

"Do you think it will hold them off?" Malia asks.

"Probably not," Scott admits.

"*Definitely* not," Lydia clarifies.

Malia and Isaac share a quick look. She throws a thumb between them, saying, "You guys aren't hoping *we're* going to be the optimists, are you?"

Scott lowers his chin and his eyebrows flit and flutter. He doesn't say anything, but Isaac can see the faintest show of amusement in his expression. Lydia doesn't respond either. Instead, she looks over her shoulder, drawing their attention to the opposite side of the bunker.

Scott leads them over to a corner of the room where, tucked against the wall, is what can only be described as a freezer. It's a vertical, human-sized box with fancy buttons and controls on either side.

"So, how cold does this thing get?" Scott asks.

"Cold enough for a hellhound," Lydia says. Her heels click against the ground as she approaches, sound echoing in the space. "It's not the same as the ice bath you gave Isaac, but," she looks at him for a moment, "it can lower your core temperature past... anything a human can survive."

Isaac knows this is their only option, but he really, really doesn't like this idea. One ice bath was enough, one swirl of memories and cold was enough for his lifetime. (And one freezer was enough too, but he'll cross that bridge when he gets there.)

"So what does freezing our asses off have to do with our memories?" Malia says, reminding Isaac that she was still stuck as a coyote when he was submerged in a tub in the back room of Beacon Hills Animal Clinic.

He offers an explanation of, "It'll slow our heart rates, putting us in a trance-like state. It's kind of like hypnosis."

"Hypnotic regression," Lydia confirms. Then, she looks up at the large shape of the freezer, "If we can figure out how to work it."

Malia points to a green button on the side of the machine, quickly saying, “This says ‘start’ so maybe it’s not that complicated.”

Isaac’s eyes drag over the gray metal of the equipment, the various dials and switches, buttons and indicators. He really wishes Malia were right, but, as Scott says with a wince, “Yeah... it’s complicated.”

“So... *optimistically*,” Malia says with pointed emphasis, “how much time do you think we need to do this?”

“As much time as Liam and Stilinski can buy us,” Scott says.

Then, he grabs the red handle and pops the freezer open with a ceremonial click. The space inside looks smaller than Isaac was expecting. *Shit.*

—

Despite the complicated nature of the machine, Malia still just jabs her fingers into the green button on the side. The freezer thrums to life. A light goes on inside and the mechanical whirring builds like it’s powering on, like it’s gaining ground, like it’s getting colder.

“Okay,” Malia says, shrugging and unnecessarily observing, “it’s doing something.” She turns to Scott, “You ready?”

Scott’s going in first. Because *of course* he is. He’s assuming most of the risk, allowing himself to be the first trial, the guinea pig. It doesn’t help that Scott has his shirt off and a resolute look on his face. It’s all a bit much for Isaac, if he’s honest.

Scott looks at him and offers a small smile. It’s a reassurance, but a weak one at best. Scott might be able to hide it from the others, but not Isaac. He can see the nervousness pulsing beneath the surface. He can tell that Scott is just as worried as he is, just as concerned about everything that could go wrong. And that is enough for Isaac to change his tune, to redefine his own feelings to placate Scott, to bring him some calm before the storm.

Isaac gives a brief nod. He forces their eyes to meet, gives in to the magnetic pull of connection. He imbues that stare with as much love and comfort as he can muster, as much warmth as he can bear. And Scott seems to melt under the gaze, determination morphing into something less frantic, something more strong felt and real.

Scott turns to the others and, as if a good handful of seconds haven’t

passed since Malia's question, whispers, "Yeah."

Then, with a creaking of the door and a steady beeping, Scott steps inside the freezer. Isaac wants to call out for him to stop, wants to tell him he doesn't have to do this, but he knows that's not entirely true. Their options are limited and this is their best bet at saving Stiles. So, Isaac clenches his fists at his side and flattens his lips in a tight line.

The freezer door closes. Isaac watches Scott through the glass.

Lydia sets the lock in place with a hiss of air. She kneels down to work the dials, but Isaac doesn't look at her. He keeps his eyes on Scott, keeps sharing in tiny smiles and quiet focus.

"Remember," Lydia says, "this will get cold enough to kill you. So, if something feels wrong or like it's not working..."

"It's going to work," Scott says. His voice comes muffled through the machine, but, even here and now, even on the other side of the glass, he's the one comforting them. It sets a fire along Isaac's skin, a kindling that can't be explained or tarnished.

"I hope you're not saying that because you think *I* know what I'm doing," Lydia says, tone grave and a little hollow.

"I'm saying that because I *know* you can figure it out," Scott says, easy as anything.

Lydia doesn't appear convinced, but she closes her mouth against any protests. And, still looking at Scott, she turns all four dials up to ten.

Immediately, Scott is affected. Cold air rushes into the space of the freezer, fogging up the glass as Scott's shoulders draw up towards his ears. He winces and rambles, "Oh, okay, all right, yeah, that's cold. *Really* cold."

Isaac really doesn't want to watch. Seeing Scott's discomfort makes his own blood turn to ice, but he forces himself to keep his eyes on Scott anyway. He forces the grimace from his features and maintains that facade of gentle care, hoping to be a light in the dark for Scott, to help settle him in these extreme conditions.

"So, what are we supposed to do?" Malia asks. "Talk to him? Help him remember? Wait till he turns into a werewolf freezy pop?"

Isaac rolls his eyes and gives a little noise of dislike, mumbling, "Can

you not?"

Lydia ignores him. Simply states, "We need to guide him." She nods, "Keep him focused."

Scott's eyes are squeezed shut now. His hands are pressing against the walls of the freezer, as if he could burst out and break free. (Isaac knows that isn't the case.) He huffs out a breath and grits his teeth, wincing and shivering. Isaac imagines he can hear the hammering of Scott's heartbeat, though that might just be his own, might be his own pulse echoing in his ears.

"Scott, you have to think about him," Lydia calls through the glass. Scott soothes at the sound of Lydia's voice, but only barely, only enough for his eyes to go half-lidded. "Concentrate on Stiles. Try to picture him in your head. Think about what he looks like, things he said."

The freezer whirs a little louder, starts to beep a little faster. All the while, Scott's head is tipped back and he's grunting past the pain of the cold. Isaac shakes his head, and a little pleading, "I don't like this. Lydia, there's – there's something wrong."

"Wait," she says, staring at Scott still. "Give it a few more seconds."

Scott heaves a sound of agony and slams his hand against the glass of the door. Isaac's heart jumps up into his throat, constricting his airway and choking him out. He can't speak, but he reaches for the handle, reaches for the release, for safety.

Lydia swings an arm out in front of him. Isaac could easily overpower her, could easily get to the door anyway, but he listens when she says, "Wait."

He stands there and watches as Scott's hand slowly drags off the glass, falling back to his side. He stops fighting against the cold and the constraint. His body goes still and quiet. And it should be a reassurance, but part of Isaac can't help but think that this is worse, this is too close to deathly stillness.

"Scott," Lydia says, "can you hear me?"

And, when Scott lifts his head and opens his eyes, they're glowing red. They're staring forward, but unseeing. He's somewhere else now, in a daze, in a memory. Somewhere far away.

—

All they can really do is watch as, slowly but surely, the red fades from Scott's eyes. His head starts to tip forward again, but it's less controlled now. It's more drooping, more like he can't find the strength to hold his head up.

"Scott, don't fall asleep," Lydia says, planting her palm against the cool metal of the door. "You have to keep your eyes open."

"Trying..." Scott mumbles. His voice is gritty and hushed, like speaking is difficult too.

Lydia taps the glass, a rhythmic motion as the realization comes to her. "It's not sleep. I think," she says, "you're losing consciousness. And if you do that, I think we're gonna lose you."

Lydia's voice breaks against the emotion and Isaac feels his own resolve crumbling. He wants to reach for the doorknob again, he wants to abandon this plan and wrap Scott up in his arms. He can't do this. He can't bear to watch Scott like this. He can't *lose* him *again*.

"Scott," Malia calls, harsh and brash and desperate too. "Stay awake! Scott!"

Isaac has barely said a word since Scott went in the freezer. He tells himself it's because he remembers what Deaton said, about more than one voice being overwhelming and confusing. But, really, he's just terrified of the prospect of goodbye, of final words.

And he doesn't want to let his mind go there. He doesn't want to be that person, that cynical and pessimistic and hopeless. But it's hard. It's hard to be positive when Scott is locked in a *freezer* and all he can do is watch.

"Scott, try to find him," Lydia instructs, tone gentle but a little pressing. "Try to find him in your memories."

Scott's head is turning, left and right, quick and jerking movements. His eyes are wide and scared. He looks terrified. He looks confused. He looks wrong.

"Find him in *any* memory," Lydia urges. "Good or bad."

Scott's eyebrows go furrowed and his eyes turn wet. He looks overwhelmed. Isaac wants to break through the glass and comfort

him, wants to whisper that it's all going to be okay.

Instead, he shoves his hands into his pockets and whispers, "What's happening to him?"

"I don't know."

"He doesn't look good," Malia says, voice quieter than it was before. "He looks... *lost*."

"I think he *is*. I think maybe it's too much information. Like, he's getting buried under all the memories, being overloaded by them," Lydia explains in a rush of frantic energy.

"So what do we do to help him?" Malia asks, losing patience.

"Scott," Lydia calls, placing her hand against the glass once more. "Scott, do you hear me?" She's practically yelling now, but Scott doesn't meet her eyes, doesn't seem to notice her at all. "You have to try to focus!"

Scott clamps his hands over his ears and squeezes his eyes shut, like he's trying to drown out the onslaught of stimulus, the rushing return of a lifetime with a person forgotten and now found.

Then, a rumbling sound.

"Did you hear that?" Malia asks as she steps towards the locked door of the bunker, craning her head to get a better listen.

"Thunder?" Lydia guesses.

"Maybe," says Malia.

Lydia heaves a heavy, hopeless sigh. She shakes her head, admits, "This isn't working."

"Then we have to figure something else out," Malia says, striding back over to the freezer with a layer to her voice that leaves no room for argument or alternative.

"I know. I – I know."

"Is he going to freeze to death in there?"

"If his memories don't kill him."

Isaac hears Lydia and Malia talking, but it's turning to background noise now. He's watching the tortured look on Scott's face, the agony in his brows and the desperation of his hands and his closed eyes.

It *hurts*. It physically hurts for Isaac to see Scott like this. He can feel the discomfort all the way to his bones, his every atom aching with the sight.

"There has to be another way to do this," Malia says. "Isn't there?"

"I don't know. This is my first attempt at trying to open an interdimensional rift in space-time," Lydia rambles. Her voice goes taut with emotion, with, "So I'm kind of fumbling around in the dark, okay?"

Isaac knows that feeling, knows they can't do anything with it. They're not going to get results until they find another way. They have to... They have to take a break. They have to regroup where Scott's life isn't on the line, where they can think a little clearer, where they can *breathe* again.

Malia beats Isaac to it, reaching for the red handle and gently saying, "I'm getting him out."

"Wait," Lydia says. Again, she stops them from freeing Scott. But, this time, it's different. She's gone calm and there's an idea in her eyes. "I'm not the only one."

"What?"

"I'm not the only one fumbling around in the dark," Lydia says, voice lit with epiphany. Then, "I think we need to treat this more like *actual* hypnosis. They use images to guide you through memories." She explains, "Like... a stairwell. The steps guide you down one year of your life to the next. That's how they regress you back."

Isaac remembers Deaton's voice above the noise, remembers him walking Isaac through the night of the bank vault kidnapping. And he thinks that, maybe, this could work.

"I get it," Malia says. "So, he needs to imagine something. W-What do we tell him?"

Lydia doesn't answer her directly. Instead, she takes another small step toward the freezer and starts with, "Scott." And, again, "Can you hear me?"

Scott whimpers and presses his hands further against his ears. Lydia isn't deterred.

"Scott, listen. Imagine this, imagine... you're in the high school. *Visualize* yourself in the high school, in the corridor where all the lockers are. Just try to imagine standing there," Lydia says. Her voice is still a little wrought, but she's settling into the role now, saying, "That's where your memories are. They're all in the lockers. They're locked away behind each one. Every memory of Stiles is in a *separate* locker."

Scott doesn't look to be calming though.

"Scott," Lydia says, stern and even. "You're there," she coaxes. "In the high school. You're standing there now."

Then, Scott's eyes pop open. Brown irises shine like a beacon of hope through the dark. His hands pull away from his ears and he stands up straight and quiet. Isaac listens for his pulse, listens for the slowing of his heartbeat. He feels his own follow.

—

"Lydia, I need your help," Scott calls, speaking for the first time in ages. His voice brings a spark to Isaac's skin, a flutter of feeling. "I don't think I can do this. I can't figure it out."

"Keep looking," Lydia instructs, centered and level. Isaac can hear the rocketing up of her own heart, can smell the anxiety of her chemosignals, but she doesn't let it seep into her voice. Years of trained facades have given her the perfect skill set for a job like this, the perfect ability to stay calm for Scott's sake.

"There are memories, but I don't know which one's the right one." Then, louder and frustrated, "What am I supposed to do?"

"Find another memory," Lydia says. "Just find another memory."

Lydia is certain and sure in her guiding of Scott, but it's not real. On the outside, in the real world, she's terrified. And so is Isaac. Frosty ice is starting to creep along the glass of the freezer. Isaac can see Scott's breath with every exhale. It's good to know that he's still breathing, but it's not good to see his lips turning blue. Isaac wants to kiss them warm, make them pink again.

"It's getting too cold," Lydia says, like a whisper. And, louder, turning

over her shoulder to look at Malia and Isaac, “He’s getting too cold.”

“What if it’s not enough to remember him?” Malia suggests. She’s holding a brick of silver in her hand, one that Isaac knows is marked with a fleur-de-lis. She uses it to gesticulate, saying, “What if it’s some kind of connection that he’s supposed to make *because* of a memory?”

“Like an emotional connection?” Lydia questions, seeking clarification.

“That could be why it worked for Stilinski, right?” Malia guesses. She looks unsure in her theory, maybe even a little insecure.

But, honestly, it makes sense. Because, “He wasn’t just remembering Stiles. He was remembering his *son*.”

Malia quickly approaches the glass of the freezer. “Scott?” she says. “Scott. Can you hear me?” She doesn’t wait for an answer, just jumps into, “Listen. I remember something. At the start of the year, Stiles was trying to find a place for you guys to live after graduation.”

Malia cuts herself off, just for a second. Her eyes are going glassy and the emotion is getting to her now. She turns to look at Isaac and Lydia. Isaac gives her a small nod, a small urge to, *keep going*.

Malia does. “He said you were getting an apartment together? And I remember saying something to Stiles. Something like, ‘it’s not always a good idea to live with your friends, even your *best* friend.’” Malia shakes her head, becoming fortified in the speech, “But Stiles said it wouldn’t matter. Because you weren’t just friends. You guys were more like *brothers*.”

Brothers. Scott and Stiles weren’t just best friends. They were more. They were brothers.

—

Scott falls out of the freezer and into Isaac’s arms. His skin is so cold it nearly burns to touch. All of Isaac’s instincts scream at him to pull away, but he doesn’t. He presses his own hands into Scott’s skin, trying to embed his own warmth into the goosebumps, trying to will them away.

“What’s wrong? Why’d you bring me out?” Scott asks. He sounds angry and confused.

“Your heart rate dropped!” Lydia protests, indignant at the accusation in Scott’s voice. “You were going to die.”

More gently, Isaac says, “We had to, okay?”

Scott looks at Isaac then back at the freezer. His voice goes hushed and quiet, a whisper of, “But then... but then nothing happened, did it?” The mood drops impossibly lower with, “It didn’t work.”

Nobody answers, but they don’t have to. Scott already knows.

Instead of bringing confirmation, Isaac focuses on warming Scott’s skin. He runs his hands up and down his arms, over his tattoo and up to his shoulders. Slowly, he helps Scott to his feet, just narrowly resisting the urge to wrap in a hug (and he’s not sure why he’s resisting – maybe just because there’s still so much rushing to do, or maybe it’s the shyness of a pseudo-audience in Malia and Lydia). He winds up with an arm around Scott’s waist. Not quite the full body contact he craves, but good enough.

“I’m going back in,” Scott says as soon as he’s steady.

Isaac tightens his arm around him, giving a quick, “No, you’re not.”

“It was working,” Scott argues, but his voice isn’t annoyed, just desperate. “Something was happening. I could – I could *feel* it.”

“But nothing was happening out here,” Lydia says. She stands between Scott and the freezer, unnecessary with Isaac’s grip around him, but appreciated nonetheless. “Nothing, Scott. All we saw was you freezing to death.”

Scott makes another forward twitch, another half-aborted attempt at breaking free, but Isaac isn’t having it. He can feel the icy chill of Scott’s skin, the tremor beneath the surface. He understands wanting to get Stiles back, but he refuses to lose Scott in the process.

“We can’t give up now,” Scott says, broken and soft.

“We’re not,” Malia says, quickly sliding out of her shirt and letting it drop to the ground. “It’s my turn.” Then, “If it’s all about connection, then Stiles is the first person I connected with in a long time.”

Isaac expects some form of protest, but nothing comes. The room goes quiet, a standstill before the next adventure. A pause before the flooding of adrenaline spurs on.

“She’ll need a visual,” Scott says.

“Okay,” Lydia nods. “I think I have an idea. But, Malia, if your heart rate goes down like Scott’s or if we think you’re going to freeze to death—”

“Then get me the hell out of there.”

Malia steps into the freezer. Again, Lydia slides the red handle into place and their second attempt begins.

—

There’s not much they can do from the outside. Isaac doesn’t know what’s going on in Malia’s mind, but he knows what’s going on out here. He knows Scott is shivering and back from the brink of death. So, he thinks it’s okay to be distracted, just for a couple minutes. Besides, Lydia seems to have it handled, guiding Malia through a library of memories.

As she does, Isaac focuses on guiding Scott’s head through the opening of his hoodie. He doesn’t say a word, doesn’t want to mess with the cautious peace of hypnosis, but he conveys enough care through the soft press of his hands and the quiet emotion of his eyes.

Scott slides his hand into Isaac’s, allowing their fingers to intertwine and lace together. They fit so perfectly. (Which Isaac knows is ridiculous. They’re just hands, most would fit together like this, but, still. It feels special. Different. Important.)

Scott’s hand is freezing, but Isaac squeezes tight. They stand outside the freezer, watching Malia and passing comfort between them like a ball of light.

“Malia,” Lydia is saying.

Her eyes are shut within the freezer. And that means she’s close to unconscious. That means they’re on the edge of danger.

“Malia, open your eyes.”

“Malia, can you hear us?”

“Open your eyes, Malia.”

They’re calling out to her, desperate and too loud for the small space, but Malia is lost to them. There’s a single tear dripping down her

cheek, looking near frozen against the blue of her skin and the frost of the glass.

Then, all of a sudden, Malia's hand presses to the door, just like Scott's had done. Her eyes fly open and her mouth parts in a choking, frantic gasp. And it becomes immediately apparent that she's not breathing, that the cold is turning her lungs to ice, freezing them still.

Scott quickly reaches for the handle, struggling to get the latch undone and bring Malia back into warmth and safety.

But then, "Scott. Look."

Above them, a glowing yellow light pulses and shines. The room seems to rattle with the energy, shaking under their feet and bringing awe to their eyes.

"Something's happening," Lydia says.

But it doesn't matter. Malia is making quiet, scratching noises at the back of her throat, like she's trying to claw in air. Her lips are quivering and her eyes are blinking slow and awkward. The machine starts to beep with frantic urgency.

Without hesitation, they get her out and falling into them, into safety, into warmth.

—

Malia is wrapped in a blanket and still shivering, but Isaac isn't paying attention to her, not really, not outside of her presence in his peripherals. He's busy staring at the freezer and wondering if he's really going to do this.

Then, without consultation or ceremony, he strips off his shirt. And, "Okay, Lydia. You got something for me?"

She looks at him like he's grown a second head.

"Isaac," Scott's voice comes as a warning, pulled tight but gentle too. He places a still not quite warm enough hand on Isaac's shoulder, saying, "You *don't* have to do this. It's a small space and scary enough without—"

"I can do it," Isaac says. And he's not sure if it's true, but he means it when he says it, he wills the lie out of his heart. He looks over his

shoulder at Scott, giving a wry kind of smile, a hint of apology there. "At least let me try? If I start to freak out, then, yeah, let me out, but. It's for Stiles. Okay? I – I want to try."

Scott looks like he wants to fight, like he wants to tug Isaac into his arms and never let him go.

Isaac adds, "Just – Trust me?"

Scott lowers his brows and glares a little at the cheap trick there, but he simply nods. "Fine."

He doesn't look happy about it, but Isaac wasn't happy about letting him into the freezer either. So, Isaac ignores the tension of that frown and turns to Lydia. She sighs, like she's doing this against her better judgment, and says, "Okay. I've got something."

Isaac nods and takes a step towards the cooler. He honestly can't believe he's doing this. He can't believe he's *willingly* getting inside an honest to god *freezer*.

But he thinks of Stiles, of the faint memories and quiet feelings there, of the smile that tickles his lips at the thought of him. And he still thinks this is misguided and ridiculous, but there's less surprise to it. Of course, Isaac would do this for him. It's *Stiles*. He would do anything for him.

And so, even as unsure as he feels, he has to at least try.

Isaac steps into the freezer.

Scott gives him one last pleading look, like he's telling Isaac, *it's okay, you don't have to do this, you can back out, we'll understand*.

But Isaac doesn't cave. He lets the door slam shut and lets the freezer walls crash down around him.

For a moment, Isaac closes his eyes and just breathes. No one says anything, no one protests, no one tries to get through to him. They let Isaac take this moment to adjust, to feel out the space and the lack of room.

There's a thrum of panic in his veins. There's no way around it and there's no denying it. Isaac just has to push through the wrong memories and into the right, has to focus on what's real and what's Stiles.

Isaac is standing, which is different than the freezer he's used to. His legs are stretched out and he stands tall, and that's what Isaac focuses on. He focuses on the extension of his legs, the freedom in that, the lack of the weight of his knees against his chest. He focuses on the straightening of his knees and the knowledge that it's his pack on the other side of the door. He has them there to free him at any signs of discomfort, they'll heed his screams like no one else ever did.

And it's enough to quell the rise of panic. At least long enough for the cold to hit.

It's like going outside in the middle of winter with bare feet and bare chest. Cold air rushes through the tight space of the freezer, confined and swirling around him, cutting against sensitive skin. It's an ache of harsh, echoing chill. It scrapes along Isaac's sides and clouds his vision. He grunts and pants against it, against the pressure, against the pain.

"Iz," Scott's voice calls through the freeze. It's an anchor in the dark and pain. "Open your eyes. Come on, look at me."

Isaac does. He opens his eyes and looks out at Scott. And he's still freezing, still shaking with the cold and the cramped, but there's an infinitesimal lift. He warms imperceptibly, he calms only barely.

"Okay, Isaac," Lydia says. "Imagine you're in the comic store. Can you see the comics?"

It takes Isaac a moment to quiet his mind, even through the cold there's still a flurry of surface level thoughts and panic. But, slowly, they drift away. And then, as if stepping into a new world, the store blooms before him. Rows and rows of colorful comics, action figures, and posters.

"Yes," Isaac whispers. "I see them."

"Good," Lydia says. It echoes in the air around him. Isaac can't see her anymore, but he knows she's there, can feel her presence, her comfort. "Focus on the shelves. Each comic book is a memory. Find the shelf with your memories of Stiles."

Isaac walks towards the back of the store, towards a familiar figurine. And it's strange. Because Isaac can still feel the press of the freezer walls around him. Though he's walking through the aisle of the store, he can still feel that restraint, a phantom haunting of his past.

The cold is there too, a whisper against his skin. It's like a constant breeze, like the AC is on high or the store's door is open to an ever chill. It hurts, but it's a distant thing.

"Find a memory where you formed a connection with Stiles."

Isaac picks up a comic. He traces his finger around the shape of Captain America, then lets it fall open in his hands. And, at once, he's transported out of the store and into a memory.

It's different from the repressed memory of *The Dread Doctors*. This time, Isaac isn't reliving it. This time, it's like he's standing on the sideline, watching himself and watching Stiles.

"If you harm one perfect strawberry-blond hair on her head, I'm gonna turn your little werewolf ass into a fur coat and give it to her as a birthday present."

And Isaac remembers how smug he felt, watching Stiles' discomfort at his presence, watching him huff and puff and threaten his life. This is the first time Isaac can remember really talking to Stiles. At least, after the bite, after he knew to pay attention to the scrawny kid with the buzzcut and the sarcasm.

Past-Isaac smirks and laughs, saying, "Really? You know, I've never actually been to one of her big invite-only birthday parties. Did ask her out once though."

"Sounds like the beginning of a heartfelt story. I'm gonna pass. Thanks."

Even back then, Stiles saw right through Isaac's leather clad bullshit.

Isaac slams the comic shut. He doesn't have much interest in hearing the rest of his ridiculous story, the rest of his ridiculous pretending that the threat against Lydia was an act of revenge, rather than a following of orders – an act of obedience and fear.

Isaac picks up another comic.

"Hold your breath."

Stiles is kneeling before a terrified looking Isaac.

And this is really not great. If Isaac didn't want to see himself being a smarmy asshole, then he definitely doesn't want to see himself on the brink of losing control, in the middle of a panic attack, on the edge of a

murderous outburst.

“Hold your breath,” Stiles repeats. “You trust me, don’t you?”

And Isaac does. He can feel it everywhere. Even through the panic that’s crawling up his skin, he can still taste the dregs of comfort, of safety, of friendship.

Isaac doesn’t realize he’s holding his breath in time with his past self until he’s gasping back into the comic store, fumbling for life. He heaves in air and chokes and hears the faint call of Lydia’s voice, but he’s hardly listening.

He grabs another comic at random. He’s not thinking about stronger or better. He’s just looking for Stiles.

“You used the whole bottle?”

Isaac can hear and feel the vibrating bass of the rave’s music. It echoes even into their hideout, throbbing in his skin and in his skull, ridiculously loud for a werewolf new to their powers.

And then he sees Erica, over Stiles’ shoulder, in the corner of the room.

Isaac drops the comic. He doesn’t mean to. It’s just that his hands are shaking so bad he can’t keep his grip. He falls out of his memory and back into the store. For a moment, he’s lost and stumbling, torn in too many directions. There’s grief in him now, that flurry of shock turning to panic quickly. His lungs feel like they’re stalling in his chest, feel like they’re gasping, like the oxygen is slipping right through his grip.

“Isaac, focus,” Lydia says. Her voice is like a wash of warm water over his freezing skin, like a soft puff of air that means open doors and freedom. “Find another memory. A stronger memory.”

Isaac does. He listens and he searches. He lets his hands trail over bright primary colors and bold fonts, dragging until they catch on a Deadpool comic. He picks it up and steps inside the memory.

“Isaac. You go with Stiles.”

Present-Isaac almost laughs at the shocked looks on both of their faces, at the way they stare at each other in mild dislike and bewildered surprise. Isaac can remember the feeling in this moment, this moment when they realized there was more than disdain between them, more than tentative allegiance.

Stiles pats Isaac back as he approaches, saying, "Hey, I'm glad you're okay."

Isaac watches himself smile and it's so real. It's so unfiltered and unabashed as he says, "Yeah. Yeah, me too."

Isaac doesn't know that he's ever seen himself smile like that. He knows he has, knows his face splits when Scott looks at him just right or when Derek plays along with one of his silly jokes. But this was before the loft and before the feelings – or, well, probably. This...

This was right after Stiles saved his life in the ambulance, this was right before the saving of the parents and the stopping of Jennifer. This was so long ago.

Isaac comes out of the memory and quickly grabs another. This feeling is addicting, this forged connection and this easiness between them.

"I killed him," Stiles spits.

And Isaac recognizes this at once. He recognizes Stiles' self-pity, the uncomfortable hospital chairs, the chasm of space between them.

"He was going to kill you," past-Isaac is saying. "It was self defense."

The memory fades before Isaac can get to the heart of it. Before he can find the connection in it, he's spiraling back to the comic store. He feels like he's moving in slow motion, he feels like he can barely breathe. He feels weak and so, so, so cold.

There'd been some escape at first. Though he could feel the walls and feel the cold, it was like a far away thing, like something happening to another version of himself. There was a disconnect and some sense of safety, but he can't hide from the elements. He can't hide from the agonizing, searing chill of his skin.

Still, Isaac grabs another comic, hopes that he can run away into the core of the memory and the comfort there.

Stiles and Isaac sit side by side on the edge of Scott's bed. They're facing forward and not looking at each other. In the doorway, present-Isaac can sense the tension between them, can sense the uncertainty.

"I almost killed you, Isaac. And I liked it." Stiles' voice is tired and he looks it too. He looks weak and worn down. He looks sick. He looks like he's dying. He's pale, he's thin, and he looks like he's getting worse.

“But that wasn’t real. That wasn’t you.”

Isaac can’t explain how he was so sure of it back then. He just knew. He just knew that Stiles didn’t have that darkness in him.

“It felt real,” Stiles is saying. There’s emotion in his voice, words sounding wet. “The consequences were real... I electrocuted you. You almost died. Why aren’t you mad?”

“Because I know it’s not your fault. I know if you had control, you would never do that.”

“How?” Stiles asks. And he finally looks at Isaac now. Their eyes meet and something begins to ease between them. Stiles repeats, voice genuine and vulnerable, “How do you know?”

“Because we’re friends.”

*“Isaac.” Scott’s voice ricochets through the air, snaking around Isaac’s chest and seeping into his skin. He comes out of the memory and back into the comic store. It’s not like he’s falling this time, it’s more like he’s blinking between worlds, opening his eyes into the cold and into the walls of the freezer. But Scott’s voice keeps coming, keeps the panic at bay with, “Stiles is my brother, but... I don’t – I don’t know if he’s ever said it to you, but *your* his best friend.”*

Best friend. Best friend. Best friend.

It echoes and reverberates and settles in Isaac’s heart.

He reaches for a comic, a first edition Batman, and lets it fall open in his hands.

They’re in the very same comic store, but the place seems to transform with saturated colors and sunny skies. Stiles is leaning against the counter while Isaac stands on the other side, watching him with something close to concern.

“What are you doing here?” he asks.

“What? I can’t come visit my best friend?”

And Isaac remembers this. The first and only time it’s ever been said out loud between them. And he’d tried so hard to play it cool, to not react to the admission, to the truth behind the statement.

Stiles is his best friend. And Isaac is his.

It's the missing piece he's always longed for.

Isaac falls out of the freezer and out of the memory. He stumbles off his feet and towards the ground, caught only by Scott and his warm embrace and quiet whispers of, "It's okay. I've got you. You're okay."

Isaac feels tears on his cheeks, but he doesn't care. He winds his arms around Scott's middle and buries his face into his neck, soaking in his comfort, his safety, his sunshine skin.

Scott strokes his hair and down his back, giving soft and gentle words of, "I'm so proud of you."

Isaac chokes on a sob.

—

"I can't believe you just did that," Scott says. He's cupping Isaac's face with his hands, so warm it almost hurts against Isaac's icy, rosy cheeks. And Isaac knows exactly what he means – willingly getting locked in a freezer and not losing control. If Isaac's honest, he has no idea *how* he just did that. He's in as much shock as Scott.

Except, maybe not. Because Scott is looking at him with the proudest, fondest, most enamored smile Isaac has ever seen. And it's far too much for him. His heart already feels like a fragile thing. He can't handle the intensity of that stare. So, he gives a forcedly nonchalant, "Yeah, yeah, whatever." And, "It's fucking freezing. Can you hand me my sweater?"

Scott does. He has to let go of Isaac to do it, which was initially part of the goal, but Isaac misses him at once, feels disappointment lurching in his gut. Scott might notice that, but he doesn't mention it, just stands there watching Isaac pull the sweater on and says, "I bet you wish you had one of those scarves of yours now."

Isaac groans. He tips his head back, muttering, "Of *all* the memories that one just *had* to come back, didn't it?"

Scott laughs and smiles at him, pulling him close. And Isaac? Isaac indulges. Scott's touch is electric and warm and he has the perfect excuse to sidle into it. So, he does. He lets Scott wrap him in his arms and that silly grin, the kind that thaws Isaac's frigid skin and melts his frozen heart.

Isaac rests his head on Scott's shoulder, breathing in the comfort of his

scent – like a breeze rippling through the preserve, like sunshine after a storm, like home. He settles in it, defrosts with it. He lets Scott run soothing hands over his arms and through his hair, lets himself bask in the comforting rays of Scott McCall, lets himself soak up the heat of his touch. Because he wants to and because he can.

He takes it all in until his hands can move without shaking and his heartbeat has aligned with Scott's. Only then does he lift his head and open eyes he didn't fully realize were shut.

Isaac catches Lydia and Malia sharing in a sideways glance, but, fortunately, neither one says anything. Isaac internally praises their subtlety.

Lydia shuts off the freezer, saying, "It was working, but it's too dangerous. If one of you goes again... you'll... you'll freeze."

Scott opens his mouth for a protest, but Isaac cuts him off before the words can break free, saying, "That's okay. We don't need to take another turn." Then, a little more dramatic than is necessary, "*You* do, Lydia. We *all* have to remember Stiles."

For half a second, Lydia looks terrified.

"He's right," Scott says, kind and understanding with the admission. "When I was remembering Stiles, I was also remembering you with him. Your connection was... different. We – We need to do this together. All four of us."

"I saw it too," Malia pipes in. She gives a look and tone so gentle and so usually out of character, "You have to try, Lydia."

Lydia nods. She steels herself against the nerves, tightening her jaw and her fists, "Okay. But we're going to have to do this the old-fashioned way. You're going to have to actually hypnotize me."

—

While the others dig around in a hunt for the objects of Lydia's request, she scribbles down on a piece of paper, absentmindedly saying, "My mother had a hypnotist who helped her quit smoking. She had me see the same one when I was ten."

Isaac stops in his frantic searching, pausing with eyebrows screwed up, but Scott beats him to the question of, "You smoked me when you were *ten*?"

Lydia looks over her shoulder, at the both of them, unimpressed and incredulous. “No. I bit my fingernails.”

Oh. Yeah. That would make more sense.

“Just – Find a light or a candle please,” Lydia reiterates.

Scott shrugs at Lydia and shares a halfway sheepish glance with Isaac, a little embarrassed but mostly amused. Then, Isaac continues digging around, but comes up empty handed. Luckily for him – and for Lydia – Malia and Scott fare a bit better.

Malia clicks on a blow torch, filling the room with the whirring sound of flame and her question of, “Too much?”

A second later, Scott holds up a small white candle, saying, “I got one!”

The candle gets placed on a table in the center of the room and lit with the way too strong flame of the blow torch. The wick sparks and the blow torch goes out, leaving only the faint dancing of fire.

Lydia sits on one side of the table while the rest stand on the other, watching as she gets situated.

“What’s that?” Scott asks, referencing the notebook on the table and Lydia’s hasty scribbling.

“An induction script,” Lydia says, adding a last few details to the page. “One of you is going to have to talk me through this.”

Lydia caps the pen and picks up the notebook. She passes it off to Malia who just so happens to be standing the closest. Malia looks between Lydia and the book, clarifying, “So, I just read?”

“Well, you have to soften your voice. Keep it relaxed, but not monotone. Go for clarity, not volume.” Then, “Try it.”

Malia does. With her finger dragging over each word and marking her place, she gives an awkward attempt at, “Take... a... deep... breath... and... look... at... the... candle...”

It’s comically bad. To the point where Lydia quickly snatches the notebook away and Isaac buries his amusement in his fist.

Lydia carries the notebook down the line, to Scott in the center. He hesitates for a moment, looking at Lydia and allowing their eyes to

meet. Isaac's not sure what exactly passes between them – some form of reassurance, more than likely.

Then, Scott gives it a go.

“Take a deep breath and look at the candle,” he says, voice smooth like melted butter, soft like freshly fallen snow. “Feel the muscles in your body begin to relax. Your hands relaxing, your eyelids relaxing.”

Lydia's eyes close. Scott falters for a second, but continues when Isaac gives him a small nod and a slight smile. It's working.

“As you relax, imagine you're sitting in front of a TV,” Scott instructs. “When you turn the TV on, it's going to play memories from your life.” And, “The remote gives you total control. You can play any memory you want. All you have to do is hit the button.”

For a moment, Scott goes quiet. They watch as Lydia sits with her eyes closed. There's a flicker of movement beneath the skin of her eyelids, like they're observing REM sleep.

“Try to find a memory of Stiles,” Scott guides. His voice remains gentle and easy, light and focused. “A memory where you felt a connection with him.”

Lydia's hand moves on the table, like she's holding a remote control, like she's pressing a button.

“*Fields Medal*,” Lydia says. Her eyes stay closed and her attention stays distant, but she's speaking now, a mumbled, trailing off, “*Nobel doesn't have a prize for mathem—*” She repeats, “*Fields Medal*.”

Scott looks at Isaac and Malia, a little shocked and a little overwhelmed. The adrenaline in the room is picking up as they watch Lydia disappear into the memory, as the last push of their efforts begins.

“Find another memory. Keep looking for Stiles. Find another memory.”

Lydia's thumb eases up and down at steady, regular intervals. She's searching for Stiles. And, by the looks of it, she's getting closer.

—

Isaac doesn't know how long Lydia stays hypnotized, he just knows

that he watches her with rapt attention. He notices right away when Lydia's hand shifts. It falls slack on the table, no longer shaped around a phantom remote.

It concerns Isaac.

He has a brief, momentary fear, a worry that Lydia is getting lost in the memories, that this isn't working anymore, that they're going to have to stop. But then...

"That's when it happened."

Lydia's eyes come open. Green garden irises are wide and wet with shining tears, but she's not really look at them. She's still dazed, coming out of the trance slow and not quite steady.

"When what happened?" Scott asks. And, a little more urgently when all he's met with is silence, "Lydia. What do you mean? *What* happened?"

"When I kissed him," Lydia's voice breaks with it, eyes trained on the flickering candle. "That's when it all changed."

Lydia looks almost haunted, like the whirl of memories is still crowding in her mind, like the pains of the past are still being dragged up and felt. Like she's still submerged in Stiles and her.

"I saw him," Lydia all but squeaks. She's bordering on a sob, a broken, "I was there. I was the last person to see him."

She squeezes her eyes shut tight and the tears fall now, gliding down her face and over the apples of her cheeks.

"Where? When did you see him?"

"The Ghost Riders, they—" Lydia whimpers, admits, "when they took him."

Then, symbolic and unsettling, like a gust of wind rippling through the bunker, the flame of the candle goes out, leaving nothing but smoke in its wake.

The emotion leaves Lydia's voice. She goes quiet and vacant, void with, "I never said it back."

Lydia tilts her head to the side, mouth slowly parting then closing. She looks up at Scott, at Isaac, at Malia. Another tear falls, silent and

heartbreaking.

“I never said it back.”

And Scott's eyes are damp too. Isaac's not sure why. He's not sure if it's empathy or if there's something else on his mind, something else triggered by the memory and those words. Isaac's not sure what it is, but he lets his fingers tangle up with Scott's, lets them knit together. While they still can, while they still have each other.

The room starts to shake, starts to shine with a faintly yellow-green glow. Isaac tightens his hold on Scott's hand, squeezing in reactionary fear and a seeking of safety.

The table rattles and shakes. Bullets clatter, containers fall off shelves, the dead candle rolls to the ground with a quiet *thump*.

Lydia stands.

She walks towards the door and they all follow her.

She reaches for the handle of the bunker, reaches to open the latch. And they should stop her. They don't know what this is. This could just as easily be the Ghost Riders coming to finish them off, but nobody protests.

They let the metal handle be lifted, let the door be pushed open.

There's a blindingly bright light. It glows harsh and crisp and white, filling the tunnel and seeming to glide toward them. It shines and sharpens, bringing detail to the dark space and hope into their hearts.

And, Lydia whispers, “Stiles?”

Riders on the Storm

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 10

Word count: 10,861

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I can see you, Stiles. Don’t stop!”

Lydia’s shouting at the blinding white light, eyes wet with tears and the glow reflected in the shine of her irises. Her hand stretches forward, like she’s reaching out towards something they can’t see. Her fingers curl in the air as the light begins to fade, as the tunnel returns to gray.

Lydia’s hand drops down to her side. “Stiles?”

Isaac looks between her and Scott, wondering if he’s the only one who doesn’t see what she sees. But Scott’s expression is warped with confusion and the shrug he gives is evidence enough in the contrary. He speaks to her turned back, a quiet call of, “Lydia...?”

Isaac sees her head give a little shake, hears the emotion cracking in her voice, “Where is he?” She spins on her heel, hair swishing over her shoulder. “It was working.”

Scott looks away from her. It’s just half a second, just the briefest of hesitations, but Lydia notices it.

Lower and more tentative, she asks, “You saw him, right?”

Malia flattens her lips in a sympathetic line, admits with apology in her tone, “We didn’t see anyone.”

“No,” Lydia says. She pivots back towards the tunnel, looking out at the expanse of gray. “He was here,” she says. “I know it.” And, going reverent, “Stiles was here.”

Isaac wants so badly to believe her, but there’s no rift and there’s no Stiles. There’s just an empty tunnel and a void in his heart.

They guide Lydia back into the bunker. Isaac's pretty sure that, if they let her, she would stand in that empty tunnel all day, staring out at the blank space with longing and devastation in her heart. She almost smells like grief.

Just as Scott is closing the door to the bunker, a hand catches on the edge, preventing the click of the latch. There's a momentary, lungs-catching spark of fear, and then the intruder comes into view.

"Liam," Scott breathes, like he can't believe what he's seeing, like he can't believe he's standing there.

"There's something you need to see," Liam says, quick and to the point.

Scott hesitates to jump into the fray of adrenaline and action, instead giving an awe filled, "You're still here."

To be fair, Isaac also assumed Liam would have been taken by now.

"But everyone else is gone," Liam concurs. There's a softness to his words, a sadness in that tone. "All of them. They're all gone." Then, urgency finds his voice, painting the statement with tension and stress, "Look, you need to come with me. It's starting. The worlds are beginning to merge and. I – I can't explain it. I have to show you."

Liam takes a backwards step, back into the tunnel and leading towards the exit, a clear signal of, *follow me*.

"Uh, all right," Scott says. And, to the rest of the group, "You guys stay here. Just in case."

"Just in case Stiles comes back?" Malia questions, sounding bewildered and incredulous.

"If there's any hope, you need to keep trying."

Scott exits through the door and starts to close it behind him. Isaac's not letting that happen.

Just as Liam had done moments before, Isaac slips his hand over the lip of the door, pressing his weight against Scott's and keeping the door propped open. He says, "Yeah. No. You're not going without me."

Scott's eyes shift in a frantic glance towards Lydia and Malia, then back at Isaac. He looks torn, like he wants to agree, but he's not sure if he's allowed. Isaac wonders if he's more worried about keeping *the girls* safe or keeping *Isaac* safe.

"They can protect themselves," Isaac says.

Then, he slips through the door before Scott can stop him.

—

Isaac doesn't know what he's expecting when Liam takes them to the hospital. But a full on train track expanding down the hall was definitely not on his list.

"This is happening everywhere?" Scott asks. He's staring down at the wood and metal of the tracks, eyes sweeping over the floor and the impossibility of this visual.

Liam steps over the tracks, saying, "Here, the school, lacrosse field."

Slowly, the three of them walk along the tracks. The wood creaks under their feet as fluorescent lights flicker overhead. There's a tangible sense of dread as they continue forward, as the tracks keep going and things keep getting worse.

"What does this mean?"

It's mostly a rhetorical question. They know it means the worlds are merging and the fragile barriers of space-time are collapsing. But, still, someone answers.

"It means..." Douglas' voice comes as a cocky drag. He appears out of nowhere, materializing on the tracks with a smug, "It's working."

Mr. Douglas sprouts razor sharp teeth, longer than a normal werewolf's, fit only for a lowenmensch. His eyes shine with that crystalline sea-green as he growls through bared teeth with shimmering claws flexing at his sides.

Isaac, Scott, and Liam react quickly, each responding with a growl of their own.

"He can't take all three of us," Liam says, but there's an unsure edge to his tone, like he's bordering on a question.

"No way," Scott confirms.

Then, accent creeping in, Douglas calls for, “*Hollenhund*. ”

A rumbling snarl echoes from behind them and, slow and cautious, the three werewolves turn to face the noise.

They find Parrish standing there. He’s shirtless and charred, as he so often is. But, unusual, is the glow of fire from within. It’s not its usual warm orange. Instead, it’s green. It’s the same color as Douglas’ eyes, as the liquid from the vat, as the poison of a Ghost Rider’s whip.

“Jordan,” Isaac begs, pleads, implores.

Parrish doesn’t listen. His eyes are twin green flames and he’s stepping closer, preparing to launch, to attack.

“Parrish, you don’t want to do this. Stop!”

Parrish can’t hear them. Not really, at least. The words wash right over him, ghosting over his head without recognition or pause. He just keeps edging forward, green fire pulsing with heat and threat.

“The train is coming, boys. There’s no stopping the Wild Hunt,” Mr. Douglas says. Isaac glimpses over his shoulder, just long enough to see him closing in too. They’re cornered between Parrish and Mr. Douglas, between two overpowered creatures, between two seemingly unstoppable forces. “You’ll make a fine Ghost Rider, Scott. And I’ll have a true alpha by my side.”

“Parrish, stop!” Scott roars and bellows, trying to use his voice to break through the enchanted haze, but it’s not working. It’s not like it is with Isaac, the call of the alpha doesn’t cut through and doesn’t anchor. It just goes stale in the air, a feeble and failed attempt.

“And then a banshee, a werecoyote—”

“A Stiles?”

“A what?”

The interruption comes out of nowhere. One second Mr. Douglas is taunting in his tirade, and, in the next, Stiles is hitting him over the head with a baseball bat. The collision sounds throughout the hallways with a dull metal *clang*.

And then Stiles is standing there, rambling, “Bad guy, right? I didn’t misread that?”

Isaac's in shock at the sight of him. He can feel his heart skipping beats in his chest, can feel his lungs aching with lack of oxygen. But there's no time for reunion or celebration because Douglas is getting back to his feet and Stiles is scrambling out of the way with a startled, "Oh god."

Thinking fast, Scott grabs Parrish by the shoulders, and, in one fell swoop, throws him bodily across the room. He slams into Mr. Douglas, sending them both tumbling to the ground in a heap of bodies.

It gives them half a pause, just long enough to look at Stiles, to take in the shape of him, the smile of his features. He's standing right there, right in front of them. And he's real. He's there and Isaac can't really believe it, can't believe that, after all this time, he's finally come back to them.

"Oh," Stiles releases a soft sound of wonder and joy.

Then, he's rushing towards Scott and enveloping him in his arms. They're both grinning so wide. Scott gives the tiniest of giggles and scrunches up his nose and the hall goes flush with relief, the scent of chemosignals so strong it makes Isaac tear up. (It's definitely *just* because of the scent. There are no other factors at play here. Absolutely not.)

"It's so good to see you," Stiles is saying.

He pulls back from Scott, long enough to grab Isaac's wrist. And then, Isaac is yanked into a hug of his own. He goes rigid for a fraction of a second and then he melts into Stiles, into this moment. And he can breathe again.

"Hey, bud," Stiles gives, just a soft whisper, an exhalation of disbelief and happiness.

"Whoa, whoa, hey!" Liam calls, lightly patting Stiles' back, trying to get his attention. "Hey, uh...!"

"Liam!" Stiles shouts, sounding so genuinely elated that Isaac can hardly take it. Stiles breaks their hug to give one to Liam, ranting, "It's so good to see you too!"

Liam returns the hug, "Good to see you, Stiles. But, uh—"

Liam is pointing over Stiles' shoulder. A distinctive whooshing sound fills the air and Isaac's attention is caught and garnered, swiveling

towards the resurfaced Parrish and the shocking waves of green flame that engulf his skin.

“Okay, yeah, we should go,” Stiles says, spreading his arms wide and pushing forward, like he’s trying to herd them out of the hall. “Go! Go, go.”

Parrish roars, sending a burst of green after them as they jump over the train tracks and sprint out of the hallway and out of the line of fire – pun intended.

—

They follow Stiles as he runs through the abandoned, leaf strewn hospital. He ducks into almost every single room, clearly looking for something, but giving them no indication as to what.

He slips inside room 213, saying, “I can’t believe I’m gone a couple days, the whole place falls apart.”

“No, you were gone for two months,” Scott corrects.

Stiles falls through the doorway, stumbling to a stunned stop. “I was... *what?*”

Scott’s answer comes as a shrugging gesture, hands splayed out at his sides.

“Okay, if they don’t let me graduate, I swear to god...” Stiles mumbles, disappearing into another room and, apparently, having his priorities set outside of surviving the Wild Hunt.

Which, okay, that tracks.

“What are you looking for?” Liam calls in after him.

They’re just standing in the middle of the hallway, not quite defenseless, but also definitely not prepared to face off against Parrish *and* Douglas. So, whatever Stiles is searching for, it better be good.

“Ah!” They hear from within the room. And, “This!”

Stiles emerges from the hospital room with a can of liquid nitrogen in his hands.

“And him,” Stiles says, jerking his head up towards the flaming figure of Deputy Parrish.

They don't have time to discuss the idea – the pros and cons and if it will work. All they can do is cross their fingers and hope.

“Grab him,” Stiles says. No one moves. He repeats, with more urgency, “Grab him now.”

Isaac thinks about the burns of his hands and the last time they tried to contain Parrish, but, even still, he doesn't hesitate. Parrish comes barreling towards them with a growl and blazing skin, and Isaac runs forward alongside Scott and Liam. Together, they once again get their hands on Parrish and redirect his momentum, shoving him up against the nearest wall. They hold him still long enough for Stiles to get the nozzle pointed out and the liquid nitrogen spraying towards him.

The coolant hits Parrish in waves of high-pressured air. It has no smell and no color, just a lot of force and a low temperature. Stiles keeps going with the hose, keeps showering Parrish with the liquid nitrogen until, eventually, the flames burn down to nothing and Parrish slides down the wall.

Liam is making pained and frantic noises, little whimpers in his throat and flinching, jumping gasps. He pats at his skin as if to extinguish a nonexistent fire, squeaking with, “Gah! Ow!”

“Liam, you're *fine*,” Stiles says, leveling him with that typical exasperation. And it's good to see that not much has changed since his disappearance.

Liam gives an awkwardly endearing, “Okay, but that doesn't feel good, y'know?”

“Stiles?” Parrish speaks from his place on the ground, looking up at them with shock and confusion written in his brows and eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“Buddy, love you, but we're way past that, okay? You gotta fill us in, what's going on?” Stiles asks, getting right to the heart of the issue.

“Douglas is merging the worlds,” Isaac says before Parrish gets the chance to answer. Explaining, “So the Ghost Riders can cross over.”

“Yeah, he wants a supernatural army in our world,” Liam adds.

Parrish grunts as he tries to move. Scott and Isaac quickly lean down, working together to help support Parrish's weight and get him back up to his feet.

“How do we stop him?” Scott asks, only once Parrish is stable and steady.

“The train,” Parrish says, looking at Scott with an unbridled intensity. Then, he directs his attention towards the arrival and departure board along the far wall, “It’s coming.”

“Okay,” Scott says, reframing his question, “and how do we stop that?”

“You can’t stop it,” Parrish says. And, for a moment, Isaac feels his stomach fall through to the floor, feels his insides turning sour. Then, “But you *can* divert it.”

Something lifts. It’s miniscule and minor, but it’s a final hint of... *hope*.

—

Parrish stays behind – since they can’t afford to have him taken over by Douglas again – while the other four follow the train tracks out of the hospital and towards the school. As they approach the sign and get closer to the awnings, Stiles asks, “How in the hell do you *merge worlds*? Okay, nowhere in the manual does it say that werewolves can do that. And *we*,” Stiles throws his arm between them, “pretty much wrote the manual!”

“He’s using Corey,” Isaac says simply. “Corey’s part-Ghost Rider and part-chameleon. That’s what gives him the ability to move between the realms.”

Stiles stares at Isaac like he’s speaking a foreign language.

Liam slows down, a gradual digression until he stops completely, standing in the middle of the tracks with eyes turned down and flicking with thoughts.

It takes the other three a few more steps to notice his absence, but, as soon as they do, they’re turning to face him and stopping too.

Isaac notes the intense look about him. Liam’s eyes are lit with the surge of idea, of realization. He says, “If we find Corey, then maybe we can stop all of this.”

“Okay,” Isaac says, slowly dragging it out. He understands what Liam is getting at, understands that it could be an easy solution to a

complex problem. But, “He’s in there and we’re out here. Even if it is that simple, we can’t get to him.”

“So, the only way to save everyone now, is to just,” Stiles splays his hands forward, “divert the train.”

Liam doesn’t give up. And Isaac sees some worry in him, something beyond the fate of the entire town, something specific and pointed. “We have to find him.”

“How?”

Liam takes a small step forward, straightening his back and puffing up his chest. “I’m going into the Hunt.”

“No, no, no. Liam,” Stiles bridges the distance between them, “I think you’re confused. We’re trying to get people *out* of the Hunt.”

“He can get taken by a Ghost Rider,” Scott suggests, getting on board with the idea at least a little bit, at least as a backup plan.

“It’s just... that’s not a pleasant option,” Stiles says. “I’m speaking from experience.”

Liam isn’t listening to Stiles at all. He’s trailing his eyes across the ground, and then looking up with bright irises, stuttering an excitedly bolstered, “I – I don’t need to be taken to get into the Hunt.”

“Okay, seems like you got an idea, lets disc–”

Liam takes off running before Stiles can finish his sentence. He jumps off the tracks and onto the grass, sprinting towards the school without a second thought.

“Where are you going!” Stiles calls after him, barely even a question with the sheer amount of shock and exasperation.

Liam disappears into the fog with a final shout of, “I’ll be back!”

Stiles watches him go with a partially rhetorical, “Were we like that?”

“Worse.”

Stiles heaves a sigh.

“Parrish said to follow the tracks,” Isaac says, hoping to guide them back to the dilemma at hand.

“Yeah, well, those lead into the woods,” Stiles gestures forward. Then, turning around to point at the tracks stretching in the opposite direction, “This way back into the school.”

“You wanna split up?” Scott suggests, but Isaac knows he’s only asking because he thinks it might be the more responsible choice, the best way to divide their labor.

Stiles looks away from the tracks and over to Scott, giving a perfectly honest, “Never again.”

Scott smiles.

Then, he glances over his shoulder at Isaac. Isaac’s not exactly sure what the look means or what is supposed to be communicated between them, but he feels the tension in his shoulders go slack as their eyes meet. Scott’s smile goes soft and Isaac’s expression goes fond, and then—

“Oh. My. God.” Stiles is gaping at them, mouth dropping open and entire body drooping against surprise. Then, all at once, he seizes with an indignant, “You kissed him, didn’t you? I – *Scott*. I can’t believe I missed it!” Stiles throws his hands in the air, ranting and raving with, “I’ve been waiting for you two to figure this out for *months*. But, *no*, of course you had to wait until I got taken by *supernatural horseback riders* to figure your shit out.”

Isaac and Scott stare at Stiles with blank expressions, both entirely speechless and too stunned to form words. Isaac is stuck trying to figure out how Stiles caught on so quickly, how he figured it out from only a look. (Though, really, if he’s honest with himself, that’s the most Stiles thing he’s ever heard. So.)

Stiles sighs dramatically. “Well, I guess it’s not that big of a deal since,” he leans in towards Scott conspiratorially, “*technically*, I beat you to it.”

Isaac feels his jaw fall open, feels himself stammer with a frantic, “Wait. Sorry. What? Are you implying—?”

“Did you kiss Isaac?” Scott is practically shouting and Stiles looks close to doubling over with laughter, amusement undermined only with the way his face has gone almost pale.

“Um,” he says, directing his answer more towards Isaac than Scott. “In the – In the ambulance? When you were... When Jennifer? And I had

to give you—" Stiles shakes his head, eyes narrowing, "Did you seriously not know about this?"

"No, Stiles. I seriously did *not*. You—" Isaac is going to have an aneurysm.

"I thought we had an unspoken agreement to not bring it up! How else did you think I saved your life!" Stiles exclaims, volume rising as the paleness fades into exasperation and confusion. And humor. He's enjoying the hell out of this.

"I..." Isaac frowns. "I don't know." And, "I thought the unspoken agreement was about your heartfelt confession?"

Stiles makes a familiar *pshh* sound. "I don't care about that."

"Uhhh," Scott says, holding up a pointed finger. "I feel like we're moving on too quickly from the fact that *you kissed Isaac*. Before me! Not cool, dude. Not cool."

Stiles scoffs, "What did you want me to do? Let him die?"

Scott pouts. "I wanted you to not kiss him."

Isaac laughs. Scott sounds so genuinely torn up about it and Isaac can't help the bubble of amusement. This is all so stupidly ridiculous. And it feels good. It feels so warm to be together again, just the three of them.

"So, what? You two are dating now?" Stiles asks.

Isaac freezes. It's a very quick reaction, disappearing just as suddenly as it forms, but he knows Stiles will have noticed it.

"Umm." Scott looks at Isaac. Their eyes lock again. Isaac can see the uncertainty in the surface of brown, but there's something deeper to his gaze. There's something lit up underneath, something buried deep with hope and maybe even excitement. Isaac takes that and runs with it, giving a little shrug and a nod. Scott returns the gesture just as faintly, then focuses on Stiles again and says, "Yes. We're dating."

Isaac's heart rate spikes.

"You just decided that right now, didn't you?" Stiles says, completely unimpressed and seeing through them instantly. "I swear, you two are *useless*."

“Hey,” Scott says, like a warning, though it’s joking and easy. “You have to be nice to us. We just saved your life.”

Stiles squints, “I thought that was more of a Lydia thing.”

“No,” Scott says quickly. “No, that was a collective effort. So be nice or we’re gonna start making out right in front of you.”

Isaac can’t help his reaction. It comes as a quiet squeak and an even quieter, “We are?”

Scott pivots towards Isaac, purposefully blocking the space between him and Stiles. He hushes his voice to a stage whisper and gives a humorous, “You can’t undermine my threat like that. We have to be a united front!”

Isaac tips his head back and laughs. He can’t help his reaction either. He’s just so... happy.

He peers over Scott’s shoulder – an easy feat – to say to Stiles, “He’s right. Be nice or we make out.”

Stiles crosses his arms over his chest, flicking his eyes between them, assessing. He shrugs, and says, “I kinda want to see that.”

“Ew!” Scott gives.

At the same time, Isaac fake gags, “Ugh. Pack it up, *Mieczyslaw*. That’s disgusting.”

Isaac revels in the way Stiles’ jaw goes slack and his head tips forward. His expression and chemosignals reek with shock. Isaac gives him no explanation, only savors in the satisfaction of actually pulling one over on Stiles for once.

Then, he takes off down the train tracks as Scott’s bright laugh pools behind him, knowing full well that the other two will be close behind. Because they aren’t splitting up ever again.

—

They walk down the train tracks, getting deeper and deeper into the woods. Until, eventually, Scott grabs Isaac’s hand and tugs him off the side. As he does, Isaac quickly snatches Stiles’ wrist and pulls him along too.

“Why are we stopping?” Stiles asks, making an affronted noise,

shaking himself free from Isaac's hold.

Isaac shushes him and grabs the edge of Stiles' shirt, giving another hearty tug and yanking him behind the cover of two twin trees, mostly concealed from any spying eyes.

"It's there," Scott says, pointing between the two trees, towards the side of the track where the diverter lies dormant. Then, he says the forsaken words of, "It can't be this easy."

Isaac bites back on a groan.

"Yes, it *can*, Scott," Stiles objects. "It can be *this* easy." His eyes flick to Isaac, "For once, let's do easy."

Stiles doesn't wait for their acceptance, just squeezes through the gap of the trees and towards the diverter, giving Isaac and Scott no choice but to scramble to follow him. Stiles lunges forward, stretching his hand out towards the lever.

And, just as fingertips are grazing the metal, the sound of whooshing leather sweeps through the air. A whip winds around Stiles' wrist, pulling him back and to the ground where he gives a frustrated moan of, "Or not."

Mr. Douglas pulls back on his grip and then Stiles is gone. Just like that, he disappears in a puff of green smoke.

Isaac looks down at the empty ground, then up at the barrel of a gun. He doesn't have time to move out of the way or brace himself or even blink. Immediately, there's a bullet firing towards him, and then Isaac is disappearing too.

—

Isaac crashes against a chalkboard. The metal lip at the bottom digs painfully into his lower back and the base of his spine as Isaac crumples to the floor.

It becomes quickly obvious that Isaac's isn't in the Hunt. Stiles described it as a train station and this is definitely Mr. Yukimura's classroom. Isaac doesn't know what that means, but he knows he can't stay here. He pushes himself up from the ground, dusting the chalk from the back of his shirt and running out into the hallway.

He instantly collides with both Scott and Stiles, bodies bumping

together as the three of them release very undignified shouts of shock and panic. They flinch back and away from each other, panting as the realization of the lack of enemy hits.

“Are you guys okay?” Scott asks.

“I think so,” Stiles says. “Finally saw the girls’ locker room,” he throws his thumb over his shoulder. “It’s not that different. It’s kind of disappointing.”

Isaac mostly ignores him, asking, monotone to hide his internal panic, “What the hell just happened?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles says as they start making towards the exit of the school. “The worlds – I think they’re collapsing in on each other.”

Then, from nowhere, a voice speaks overhead, static and distorted with, “*Attention passengers: the train will be arriving in eleven minutes.*”

Isaac recognizes that voice.

But he doesn’t have a chance to say anything about it because then they’re crashing through the double doors and through another blinding green light, through a portal that scatters them across the high school.

—

Isaac winds up in the janitor’s closet. Because, of course, he does. Luckily for him, this time, there’s no vending machine barricading the door, so Isaac is easily able to make his escape. He ducks out into the hallway, rushing in any direction he can scramble away in. Thoughts of Corey swirl in his mind, the epiphany distracting and clouding his judgment.

“*Isaac,*” a voice croons.

Heavy footsteps hit the ground and Isaac knows who it is before he’s even considered turning around.

“What? You thought you could get rid of me that easily?”

The voice is dark and haunted and the steps are getting closer, gaining ground and encroaching on Isaac’s space, nearing his back that’s open and vulnerable to being stabbed.

Without thinking, Isaac shoves his hands into his pockets, pulling out

twin ring daggers as fast he can. He spins with the movement, turning face to face off with the threat, with Allison Argent.

He's not entirely sure what he was expecting. Some dramatic reveal, some obvious evil. But it's just Allison. Sure, her eyes are missing their kindness and her smile is a little too sharp, but it's still just Allison. Isaac doesn't miss the way her eyes track the movement of the ring daggers.

"That's cute," she says. "You think you can beat me with my own weapon?"

Isaac clears his throat. Not a single part of him wants to fight her, but he's not sure he has any other choice. She's leering at him and stalking closer. And then, there are ring daggers twirling around her fingers too.

Allison makes the first move. Isaac is too hesitant and too frozen, but then there's a sharp stinging scratch of metal dragging down his skin and bringing Isaac to life. He's been here before a few times. Allison has stabbed him with these knives more than Isaac can really count. It's all too familiar. It burns bright in Isaac's memory.

She lunges forward again, but Isaac blocks the movement. The blades of their daggers clang together with a spark of heat and a scrape of metal on metal. Allison might have more skill than Isaac does, but he knows her fighting style – he *learned* from her fighting style.

Allison has never seen Isaac use the ring daggers before. And that doesn't necessarily give him an *advantage*, but it puts them on more equal footing than what would otherwise be true.

And so, with a level playing field, they fight.

Isaac lets himself turn fluid. He tries to focus his eyes below Allison's jawline, tries to forget who it is that he's fighting, tries to remember that she's not real. He tries to stay detached, to fall into the rhythm of the battle, the swinging of the daggers.

It's not totally working. Isaac's subconscious is still betraying him, still pulling his punches, but he's landed a few good hits and he's not down for the count yet. He lets the daggers run in tandem with each other. He lets them feed off of each other. He lets their momentum build and ebb, a constant push and pull.

Allison lands another hit. This time, it's deeper. She digs in past the

first layer of skin, a stab into his side, just below the line of his ribs. It makes Isaac wince and cry out as blood comes to the surface, dripping down over his skin and staining his shirt.

And that's when Isaac hears another set of footsteps. That's when he hears another familiar voice saying, "Allison?"

Isaac looks over his shoulder. Just long enough to see Chris Argent stopped at the edge of the hallway. His face is distorted with emotion, wrought with it. Pain. Confusion. Grief. Confusion.

"She's not real, Mr. Argent," Isaac says as quickly as he can manage. He has one hand clutched over his side, staunching the flow of blood as the wound knits up messy and fast, but not quite fast enough. "The Hunt brought her back, but she's not real. It's not her. You have to believe me. Please."

"Oh, but, *Isaac*, aren't I real?" Allison says his name like it's a curse, like it's something dirty. "I know how much you love Scott, but..."

There's a flash of blinding light and a crack of thunder. It comes from everywhere and nowhere. Isaac nearly jumps out of his skin, has to blink repeatedly against the onslaught of shining glow.

And when he finally gets his eyes open and adjusted, Allison is standing before him once more. But, now, her features are tilted and wrong. Her skin has faded into gray and her eyes have hollowed into darkness. Her skin runs with grooves and lines, the markings of a Ghost Rider.

"I love him more," she says.

And then, before Isaac has time to act, Allison is slamming him against the wall of lockers. Her dagger rests along his throat, not quite cutting through, but prickling with the threat. His neck instinctively tips back, trying to keep as much space between his throat and the blade.

Isaac feels tears on his cheeks. He doesn't want this to be happening. He doesn't want this to be his last memory of Allison.

Allison starts to press down and Isaac knows this is it. He can smell his own blood, can feel it running warm down his neck. He knows Allison is going to kill him. He tries to remind himself it's not really her, tries to remember her bright smile and her kind eyes, tries to prepare himself for the final moment.

He's not ready. He's not ready to die, but then... he always said he would never make it to the end of high school. And maybe it's poetic – to die at Allison's hand when she sacrificed herself for him, killed by their shared weapon, the symbol of their connection. Maybe this is the true tragedy of Isaac's life – dying only moments after defining things with Scott, only moments after saving Stiles.

Isaac closes his eyes and thinks of nothing, waiting for the final blow, for the final push of the dagger.

But it never comes.

Isaac blinks, and then a gun fires. There's no final moment. There's just an explosion of green smoke and Argent standing there with fear and tears mixing in his eyes, with a Ghost Rider's gun in his hand.

Isaac gasps for breath and slumps against the locker, hand instinctively reaching for his throat, for the healing cut and the staining blood.

Chris Argent is on him in seconds, helping steady Isaac on his feet and keeping him from crashing to the ground.

Isaac rasps, "Thanks."

Argent gives him the smallest smile and then they're hugging. Isaac's pretty sure he makes an embarrassing squeak like, "*oh*." He lets himself be wrapped up in the scent of gunpowder, oil, and something unnameable – something that reminds Isaac of Allison, the *real* Allison.

Isaac's not sure how long they stand there hugging, but it can't be long. There's too much at stake to linger, but his brain feels soupy and time feels funny.

"How did you—" Isaac swallows. "How did you escape?"

"Melissa and I were in the train station, looking around for you kids. I walked through a door and suddenly I was back here, in the high school," Argent explains.

Isaac nods. Right. "Stiles says the worlds are collapsing in on each other." Then, "I need to find Scott. I have to – I have to help him get to the diverter."

Argent smiles again, just as small, but different now. It's almost

knowing, almost... proud. "Go," he says. "Save Scott." And, "Do it for Allison."

Isaac's heart shatters into a million pieces, but he listens anyway. He collects the dust and runs out towards the blue double doors. This time, he breaches the fresh air of the night and follows the train tracks out into the woods.

—

"You, of all people, Scott, should know what happens to a lone wolf."

Scott is surrounded on all sides. Mr. Douglas stands before him, mouth and features twisted disturbingly to fit his lowenmensch characteristics. His eyes glow a nasty green, but it's not him Isaac is worried about. He's more concerned by the *flock* of Ghost Riders. There's dozens of them, crowding Scott at every angle.

And yet, he stands on one side of the diverter with Douglas on the other and he's not backing down.

Scott gives a roar, but the fight doesn't begin.

"He's not alone!" a voice yells. And it's the last person Isaac is expecting to see.

Theo Raeken waltzes past the Ghost Riders and up towards Scott. His shirt is torn at multiple points and there are faint splatters of blood across his skin, but he's a vicious fighter with a survival instinct to boot – they all know that – so there's little surprise in seeing him left standing. The surprise comes in watching him step out of the shadows and into the light, into the fight that he has no reason to join.

"He's got a pack," Theo announces.

Malia falls in line next to him, quickly correcting, "And Theo's not in it." She stands up straight and tall, "But I am."

Isaac rolls his eyes. This is so stupid. And yet, he's pulling himself out of the darkness and into view.

"I'm not," Peter says. Isaac wants to stab them all. "In the pack. But... no one likes a Nazi."

And then, they're all turning towards Isaac.

"What?" Isaac says. "Why are you all looking at me? Do I have to say

something too?" And, "Can't we just fight?"

Then, they do. Scott's eyes shine with the red of rubies and he gives another snarl, and that's it. He lunges towards the diverter while the other four run at the Ghost Riders.

Isaac abandons the ring daggers for this fight, having long since shoved them into his pockets. Instead, he lets the full shift take over and sinks into the primal instinct of a pack member in danger and the need to protect.

Isaac ducks under green bullets, falling into a somersault to get in close range of the Ghost Riders without being at gun level. He swings back up to his feet, slashing with claws and kicking into gray chests.

They're greatly outnumbered, but it hardly matters. The Ghost Riders aren't motivated like they are, don't have the same fierceness, the same inability to lose. There's so many Riders, but Isaac uses them against each other, slamming one Ghost Rider into another and letting their weight topple to the ground.

Isaac ends up fighting close to Peter, who really, really doesn't need his help. But they bounce off of each other anyway. Isaac resents the way the rhythm seems to come easy between them, blames the fact that Derek mostly taught Isaac how to fight and Peter probably taught him.

Regardless, they work together well. Sending Ghost Riders sprawling to the ground in seconds with nothing but mean sneers and blood stained claws to show for it.

"Your little friends are no match for the Wild Hunt." Douglas must love the sound of his own voice because Isaac can hear it from across the stretch of woods. He can hear the way he taunts down at Scott with, "There are too many of us, and too few of you."

Isaac takes just a second to check in on Scott, just long enough to see him breaking free from under Douglas' boot, watches him powering ahead and showing no signs of giving up. Isaac smiles – proud, in an almost heated way.

"Isaac!" Malia shouts.

He nearly gets a whip around his throat for the momentary distraction, but Malia calls out just in time. Isaac throws out a hand, grabbing the leather before it can make its snaking attack. He gets a

tight grip and then yanks hard, using the whip to pull the Ghost Rider in close.

He knees up into the Ghost Rider's stomach. Or where his stomach should be. Isaac's not sure about the inner workings of a Ghost Rider. All he knows is that the impact causes a reaction, causes the Ghost Rider to hunch inward.

Isaac pulls even harder on the whip, freeing it from the Rider's grasp and into his own. He pushes the Ghost Rider down further, slamming his nose into Isaac's knee this time. Then, he grabs the back of Ghost Rider's jacket, the stupidly dramatic lapel, and uses it to pull the Ghost Rider upright. He jabs a slice of claws up his chest and punches him in the face with the hand still held tight around the whip.

A train horn blows. It's getting closer, their window of opportunity is closing quickly.

Isaac shoves the Rider back and away, watching only for a moment as he stumbles before once again searching for Scott in the fray.

He's standing next to the diverter. He's close, but he's not close enough. It's just out of reach and Douglas is poised to attack, waiting for Scott to make a move so he can suppress it, redirect it, use it against Scott.

Isaac can see the train now, can see the glowing yellow of its light. He has to do something.

The weight of the whip rests heavy in his hand. And Isaac might be crazy, this might not work, but he shouts, "Scott!" and then, he throws.

The whip soars through the sky and into Scott's hand.

There's nothing anybody can do. There's no time to stop him, no time to get to the diverter. All anyone can do is stand and watch, watch as Scott throws out the leather, as it races through the air and towards the lever.

The whip loops around the handle. Scott tugs and it... it works?

Mr. Douglas makes a final charge towards the diverter, but it's too late. The whip has already cracked. The leather stays tight enough to get leverage, and, when Scott pulls, the diverter goes with him, sliding into place with a metallic crank.

The track shifts and redirects and the train *rockets* by. The horn is loud and echoing and the close distance of the vehicle makes the ground shake and the air around them whistles and turns to a breeze, but the train doesn't stop. It passes them by. And, quickly, it disappears out of view.

It worked.

Mr. Douglas staggers forward, pained and agonized grunts falling from his lips. He stares off at the empty tracks, like he can will its return, like he can will this away.

"You missed your train," Malia snarks.

Then, Scott howls. He tips his head back and roars up at the night sky, unleashing a call of victory, of safety, of pack. It's a signal to those still in the Hunt, to Liam and hopefully to Corey. It says, *we did it, the train has been diverted.*

Despite the call of survival, they're not quite out of the woods yet. The Ghost Riders encircle them. Everyone that fought on Scott's side, all are rounded up and enclosed in a ring of Ghost Riders and their guns. For a moment, Isaac is terrified it didn't work, terrified that he was wrong about Corey.

But then, there's a rumble overhead. Thunder crashes and breaks. Lightning crackles and the clouds rush on, racing across the sky and away from Beacon Hills. The sea of storm parts for clear skies and passes on for another battle, for another day.

The Ghost Riders lower their guns and holster them. Like the flipping of a switch or the pulling of a lever, in an instant, the Riders lose all interest in them. They start walking towards the train tracks, void of feeling as if being pulled on a wire or tugged on a magnet. There's something almost hypnotized about them.

"Where are you going?" Douglas questions, voice dangerous and dark, but posing no real threat to them. Not anymore. "Stop." And, in German, "*Zurückkommen.*"

He steps up onto the train tracks, anger mounting as he demands, "Come back and kill them. *Tote sie.*"

The pack and their tentative allies trail after Mr. Douglas, standing on the tracks behind him and watching as the weight of his failure crashes down.

“Call your army back,” Theo says. And, for once, Isaac doesn’t quite mind his snark. (He doesn’t like it. Definitely not. But he doesn’t *hate* it either.) “Or don’t they listen to you?”

“I am your leader,” Mr. Douglas declares. He starts stomping towards the retreating form of the Ghost Riders, gaining closer and closer. “*Ich bin dein Anführer.*” Back to English, “Obey me!” And German again, “*Gehorcht mir.*”

The Ghost Riders stop. In perfect synchronicity, they all turn at once. Slow and steady, they pivot, rounding on Mr. Douglas and staring straight at him.

“Kill them,” Douglas says. “All of them.”

But Isaac isn’t watching them. He’s watching Theo and the way he looks over his shoulder at the rest of the group, giving them a look that can only mean one thing, *trust me*.

Isaac doesn’t. But he doesn’t lunge ahead or fight back either. He reaches for Scott’s hand and stays perfectly still.

The Ghost Riders march forward.

“*Tote sie,*” Douglas is saying. “*Tote sie.*”

But there’s no final attack. At least, not against them.

The Ghost Riders form another circle, another blockade of bodies. But this one wraps around Mr. Douglas.

“Riders don’t bow,” Theo says, easy as anything. “They have no leader.”

And then, right before their eyes, Mr. Douglas begins to transform. His hands turn gloved, his eyes go black, his skin embeds with bark-like lines. His mouth bleeds into one, disappearing altogether as his eyes sink into his skull, into blackness, into shadows.

Mr. Douglas shrieks through Ghost Rider lips, not dissimilar to the neighing of a horse.

And then, lightning strikes and the Riders disappear. The train tracks and the storm go with them, leaving nothing but the sparkling stars of the night sky and a faintly green tint of smoke.

It's like the world is reset. Everybody returns. Not in the exact locations of where they were taken, but where they're supposed to be.

So, of course, Derek appears on the edge of the pack in the middle of the woods. It would be at least a little comical, in a sort of ironic way, if not for the way that Isaac gasps. He drops Scott's hand, forgot he was even holding it, and runs at Derek.

Their bodies collide in a tight, almost vicious hug. Isaac might be crying. He's not sure and he really doesn't care. He squeezes Derek as much as his tired limbs will allow. And Derek holds him back with just as much vigor.

"I can't believe you did that," Isaac says. "You..."

Isaac can't put it into words. He can't articulate the weight of Derek's sacrifice, of what he did not just for Isaac, but for the fate of all of Beacon Hills as well.

Derek doesn't say anything, merely grips him a little firmer, a little impossibly so.

"You're never doing anything like that ever again," Isaac whispers into Derek's shoulder. He's certain his breath must tickle, but Derek doesn't flinch or pull away.

Derek gives nothing but a weak chuckle and a quiet sort of, "I don't know about that. You seem to always need my saving."

Isaac pinches the skin of Derek's arm, stinging hard enough that, this time, Derek does flinch. He breaks the hug, not completely, just enough to smack Isaac in the shoulder, a light hit lit with affection.

Isaac smiles at him, so wide he feels like his face is going to split with it.

Then, a thought strikes in the back of his mind and the grin falters, dropping down a half step. "Wait," he says. His eyes roam over Derek's face, looking for signs in the green of his eyes, like his expression will tell him everything he needs to know. "Is – Is Corey okay? I heard his voice on the intercom, but--?"

Derek's features flit with worry for a second so quick Isaac almost misses it. He's schooled back to neutral before Isaac can even blink, saying, "He was, uh. He was pretty hurt, but Mason was with him. Mason'll make sure he's okay, they – they're probably at the

hospital.”

Because people are turning up wherever they need to be.

And Derek needs to be here. (With Isaac.) And so, Isaac buries his fear for just a moment more and pulls Derek back in for another hug. He thinks about Stilinski, about that saying of his. *Once, twice.*

Derek sacrificing himself for Isaac seems to be becoming something of a pattern.

—

Corey lies in a hospital bed. His body is covered in circular holes, all with a blue-ish green tint around them. He's pale and weak and tired. His eyes have stayed mostly closed, fluttered open only briefly when Isaac arrived. He gave the tiniest, slightest, tight-lipped smile. Isaac had returned it tenfold.

Melissa preps a syringe, filling it with an amber liquid Isaac doesn't recognize or know.

“Can you fix this?” Mason asks.

Isaac stands close to him, trying to radiate comfort through his body, trying to assure Mason that everything's going to be okay.

“Oh, she knows what she's doing,” Argent says. And Isaac catches a weight to his tone, in the way he stands next to Melissa. *Huh.*

“Have you ever heard of the nine herbs?”

“The nine sacred herbs of the Saxons—” Mason begins.

Isaac finishes, “—used to cure poison and infections? Yeah, we've heard of them.”

“Did you need to know what they are?” Mason asks.

And, by the look on Melissa and Argent's faces, the answer is definitely no, but there's a hint of amusement underneath the exasperation. Isaac feels himself flushing just a little bit. He blames it on Mason. He's a bad influence, dragging Isaac down to his nerd depths and making him get carried away with his interest and intrigue and enthusiasm. His energy is contagious like that, even at a time like this, even with a wounded Corey before them.

“No,” Melissa says, despite the way the answer was already made obvious. “I think I got it.”

Then, she injects the amber fluid into Corey’s skin.

In an instant, he seizes up and gasps. Mason tries to grab his hand, but Isaac bats him away. Only because Isaac can take pain and Mason can’t. Isaac will leech some away and then let Mason do the comforting of a boyfriend, no questions asked.

Corey’s upper body lifts from the table and his eyes fly open. It lasts all five seconds, this panting and grunting and pain. Then, he crashes back down and his eyes go closed.

His skin starts to knit and heal together. And Isaac knows it’s only exhaustion keeping him out of consciousness. He lets go of Corey’s hand and lets Mason take over.

Isaac looks up at Argent and says, “Can we talk?”

—

They find a not-so-crowded corner of the hospital and sit down together. Isaac explains everything to the best of his abilities without any prior prompting. Because he knows Argent wants to understand how his daughter was standing there in front of him, how she was warped into a Ghost Rider. But he also knows that Argent isn’t likely to ask of his own accord, though whether that’s for fear of the answer or fear of upsetting... well, that’s where Isaac’s certainty fails.

Regardless, they sit together and Isaac explains. He explains the existence of Lenore and Caleb. He explains the void Stiles left between them, the way Isaac, Scott, and Lydia couldn’t function without him. He explains how they filled that gap with Allison, how she was here, but she wasn’t real. He explains how Theo’s return marked her end, how they couldn’t sustain her presence once they remembered Stiles.

Argent never once interrupts and he never once shows any sign of emotion. Only when Isaac is finished, does he ask, “So, how come I never saw her? Until, you know.”

Isaac does know. He can still feel that blade pressing against his throat. He knows it’s not there, he knows there’s no scar, no bruise, nothing to show for it. And yet, he can feel it all the time.

“Because you didn’t need her,” Isaac says. Then, when that sounds

more harsh and wrong than he intended, “Sorry, I – I mean. When Stiles was taken, it didn’t affect you as much as it affected us. So, I think... I don’t know for sure, but my theory is: this – this Ghost Rider Allison, I think she knew you wouldn’t believe in her. So she kept her distance. I guess?”

Argent nods. “Right.”

Isaac nods back. And, again, “I’m sorry, Mr. Argent.”

“What for?”

Isaac shrugs. “A lot of things.”

Argent places his hand over Isaac’s. It’s some of the gentlest affection Isaac has ever received. He feels the pieces of his heart coming together a little more cleanly, feels the pressure at his throat alleviate. “You don’t have anything to be sorry for.”

Isaac’s not sure if it’s true, but he doesn’t protest. He simply nods once more.

—

Melissa comes to find Isaac when Corey wakes up and it's his turn to visit. She guides him back towards the glass room and gestures to a chair at Corey’s bedside. Isaac gives her a smile and a quiet, “Thanks.”

Then, he takes his seat and says, “Hey.” (He feels the very strange desire to tack on a, *kid*. He doesn’t, of course, but it doesn’t negate the feeling.) “How are you doing?”

Corey gives an awkward one armed shrug, “Okay. I can feel myself healing. Which is still so weird, by the way. Do you ever get used to it?”

Isaac mimics the shrug. “Not really.”

Corey smiles at his honesty. “Um. Mason was here earlier. He said you – you figured something out?”

“Oh.” Isaac was kind of expecting someone else to tell Corey, didn’t realize it was going to be left to him. It’s kind of nice though, having this moment to fulfill his promise to Corey, to share everything he learned. He says, “You’re part-chimera and part-Ghost Rider. That’s

where your abilities to travel between the worlds come from and why Mr. Douglas was trying to use you to merge the realms.”

Corey gapes. Isaac keeps going and Corey keeps listening. Isaac doesn't put word to the feeling between them, not now and maybe not ever, but something settles in his chest, something like that potential he used to feel with Liam.

—

Derek pulls up in front of the school, but Isaac doesn't get out yet. It's his last day of high school. It's the last time Derek will be dropping him off outside. Isaac wants to soak it in, just for a second.

“Do you need a ride later?” Derek asks. He doesn't comment on Isaac's hesitation, simply lets him take his time and fills the comfortable silence between them with easy questions.

“No,” Isaac says. He glances out the window, spotting Scott waiting for him on the sidewalk. Scott gives an awkward little wave and Isaac feels his heart swoon. He can hear it in his voice when he says, “I've got it covered.”

Derek makes a soft noise of disdain, something close to a groan. “I still can't believe you waited until *after* I got taken into the Hunt to kiss him. I mean, seriously. After all those phone calls I had to listen to and all your p—”

“You sound exactly like Stiles,” Isaac says. Mostly because it's true, but also because he knows it will shut Derek up.

And, as expected, his lips click with a close.

Isaac looks away from Scott and the school and over to Derek. He takes this in too. His deadpan stare and his hands on the wheel.

Derek says, “Okay. *Out*. Get out of my car. You can't disrespect me like that.”

Isaac laughs, but listens. He clicks off his seatbelt and shifts his body to face Derek, looking him in the eye and going a little serious around the edges, he says, “Thank you.”

“You haven't thanked me for a ride since you were still a junior,” Derek says. He's deflecting, Isaac knows. He can see the sentimentality in the forest of his eyes, can see the emotion flitting within, the

warmth and the affection.

Isaac smiles, "I'll see you later."

"Have a great last day," Derek says.

And then, for the final time, Isaac gets out of the car and steps out onto the sidewalk of Beacon Hills High School. The engine of Derek's car rumbles and Isaac can hear him driving away, but he doesn't look over his shoulder, doesn't watch him leave.

He's too distracted by Scott, by the brightness of his smile and the way he's coming closer.

Isaac reaches out and circles his hand around Scott's wrist, tugging him the last bit closer and kissing him. It's soft and brief, just a quick press of lips, but Scott grins into it.

Isaac slides his hold down from Scott's wrist and interlaces their fingers.

"Ready?" Scott asks.

Isaac nods, "Yeah. I'm ready."

Then, hand in hand, they walk into the high school for their final day.

—

It goes by so quickly. It's all a blur in Isaac's mind until, suddenly, the bell is ringing and students are standing and Mr. Croft is announcing, "Have a great summer, everyone. To the seniors, I'll see you all at graduation."

"No," Stiles says, looking around as the classroom empties, leaving only the five of them at their desks. "No, no, no, no. That's it? What?"

Scott is smiling at him with that blinding brightness and, "Last day ever."

Stiles looks so put out by it. And, honestly, Isaac feels for him. Stiles was the one who put the most emphasis on this last year of high school, on the idea of enjoying their last few months together, and then he missed them. He got taken into the Wild Hunt and reappeared just as the end was drawing near.

"It just feels so anticlimactic," Stiles says, slumping in his seat a little.

Isaac gives him a sympathetic smile.

“Well, there’s the whole *graduation* thing,” Lydia says. Her tone suggests impatience or exasperation, but her words are reassuring and her eyes are gentle.

“I’ve gotta go to summer school or I can’t do the whole graduation thing,” Malia adds. Isaac’s not entirely sure how that’s supposed to make Stiles feel better, but the effort is nice.

Scott grabs his bag and gets up, saying, “Let’s do it.”

Isaac follows him quickly, as do Lydia and Malia, mostly ignoring Stiles’ protests of, “No. Come on. *Wait*. Guys?”

—

Isaac packed up his locker before his last class, just so he could do this, just so he could stand in the same hallway with Scott and Stiles. He watches them gather their things, watches them finish out high school, watches them take their final step.

“I can’t believe we’re not in high school anymore,” Scott says. He’s been smiling all day. It’s making Isaac’s stomach hurt, just a little. “Kind of feels like nothing’s really changed.”

Stiles looks at Scott and then down the hall at Lydia. (And that was a development that Isaac and Scott both missed – a kiss in the locker room while the Wild Hunt and Beacon Hills fought to become one. It’s a good thing they weren’t there though, if only because now Stiles can’t give them a hard time about getting together without *his* presence.) Stiles has been pining after Lydia since the third grade. And, now, she’s smiling at him with so much adoration, so much love.

Isaac looks away, mostly to let them have their moment, but also to look at Scott.

This thing between them... it’s brand new, but it’s also been building for years. It feels so symbolic to be finishing this last day together, the same as ever, but completely different too. It’s old and it’s new. It’s meant to be.

It’s inevitable, really.

Stiles says, “Everything’s changed.”

And Isaac knows it to be true.

Stiles drops the hood of the Jeep to a close and then rounds the back of the vehicle, saying, “Okay. Liam. So, since you’re the new alpha–”

“I’m not an alpha,” Liam objects, leaning against the car with mock nonchalance. He’s pretending as if he’s taking part in this little commemoration moment solely for Stiles’ sake, but Isaac knows it’s deeper than that, knows he feels the burden of their leaving – of *Scott* leaving.

“Right, but, you know, alpha-in-training,” Stiles says, hands circling in his ridiculous, expressive way.

“Well, I’d have to kill an alpha.”

He’s being difficult on purpose, making Isaac smirk in gentle amusement.

“Liam,” Stiles levels, impatient. “Since you’re taking over, the most important thing you can remember is that Mason,” Stiles points at him, “is always gonna be the one who’s there to save your ass all the time.”

“Well, not *all* the time,” Scott protests, actually sounding a little bit offended by the statement.

“Most of the time though,” Stiles concedes. Then, louder and reaching into the back of the Jeep, “Which is why...” he pulls out an aluminum baseball bat, “I think you’re going to need this.”

Mason definitely doesn’t understand the gravity of the exchange. “Uh. I don’t play baseball.”

“Right,” Stiles says, still holding out the bat. “Neither do I. It’s... It’s not the point.”

He stretches his weight forward, basically forcing Mason to take the bat. He does, albeit a little awkwardly, flashing a confused look towards Isaac and a quiet, “Thanks.”

Stiles claps his hands together only once.

“Is that it?” Liam asks, pointing in the direction of his own car, like a

gesture of, *can we leave?*

“One last thing,” Isaac says. Because he really can’t help himself, “Don’t underestimate Corey.”

Liam and Mason share a quick look and then they nod and walk away. It’s all a little strained and stiff, but Isaac doesn’t really care. He’s still basking in the sunshine and the warmth of the last day ever.

“Love you guys!” Stiles calls after them, so authentic and so easily.

Then, he reaches into the back of the car and extends a roll of duct tape. To Isaac, he says, “I leave you with this.”

And Isaac still can’t believe Stiles is doing *this*.

“You know, hurt her and I’ll kill you,” Stiles says, but the threat is weak and his smile is huge.

Isaac spins the duct tape in his hands. “Are you sure you won’t need it?”

(*Need*, but he’s thinking *want*. Because Isaac has always known how important the Jeep was to Stiles, but it came even more apparent in the months of his disappearance, in the reveal of the deed in the glove box. This car belonged to Stiles’ mom. And, now, he’s handing *Isaac* a roll of duct tape, a ceremonial passing of the torch.)

“It’s okay,” Stiles says. “Lydia is gonna drive me down to D.C. She wants to help me move into my dorm. So...” Then, “Besides, you can’t keep forcing Derek to drive you around everywhere.”

“You *know* driving me to school was *his* idea, you bring it up every chance you—” Isaac cuts himself off, quickly realizing what Stiles is doing. He’s diffusing the tension and distracting him.

Stiles’ grin widens impossibly further. “Come on, I’ve already decided. I trust you.”

Isaac sort of wants to pass out with the admission.

Scott and Stiles must know that because Scott puts a kneading hand on his shoulder and Stiles launches into, “You know Lydia’s starting M.I.T as a junior? How do you even do that?”

“I...” Scott makes a choked off noise of bewilderment. He shakes his head, “She’s a genius.”

“Real question is,” Stiles redirects, “how did *you two* get into UC Davis?”

Scott answers with, “Glowing recommendation letter from Deaton.”

And, from Isaac, “Tragic backstory.”

“How did *you* get into George Washington?” Scott asks. It all feels so easy and casual and warm – this talking in the parking lot, this little circle of the three of them.

“I – don’t know. Uh, your dad,” Stiles says. “The, uh, big FBI pops,” his hand is waving in the air, but Isaac is thinking about Young Derek and egg rolls, “made a call to the little pre-FBI program...” Stiles trails off, gives a little shrug as if to say, *and that was that*.

“Pre-FBI,” Scott repeats. His voice is impressed and warm and fond. He’s *proud*. (Isaac is too, but he will not be admitting that. At least, not today.) “Wow,” Scott whispers. “I guess we’re not the same kids running around the woods looking for a body.”

“No, we’re not,” Stiles says. He reaches his hand into his pocket and retrieves a set of keys. He’s looking down at them, like they’re something special and sacred. And Isaac knows they are, recognizes the green key chain and the silver glint.

“You can keep the Jeep,” Isaac says quickly. It was a sweet gesture, but Isaac’s been half-expecting Stiles to fall through on the offer since he first brought it up. He won’t be mad or bothered in the slightest.

Stiles shakes his head. “No. No, I *want* you to have it.”

His heartbeat stays steady.

Stiles looks beyond Scott and Isaac, across the parking lot at the sea of students, “They still need us.”

Scott follows the direction of his gaze, giving a quiet, “They’ll always need us.”

And it’s true. They can’t keep waiting for things to die down, for everything to be okay. They’ll be waiting forever if they do.

“And, y’know,” Stiles says. “I... I need you. *Both* of you.”

Scott’s response comes easy, “I need you too.”

Then, they're both looking at Isaac. He wants to be snarky, wants to pull up that same, "*do I have to say something too?*" But he can't quite bring himself to do it. All he can manage is a quiet, "Yeah. Yeah, same."

They both smile at him.

"I'm gonna miss you," Stiles says. Then, not allowing them to go around in circles with the sentimentality, "No, really, I *need* you, though. I lost my license in the Hunt, so you have to drive."

Scott laughs. The tension and sadness melts away and then it's just the three of them, just the easy atmosphere of their friendship. "Your dad's the sheriff. I'm sure he'll let it slide," Scott says. "You drive."

Stiles agrees and the three of them pile into the Jeep – Stiles' relic, the piece of him so important that it *couldn't* be erased. The piece that he's giving to Isaac. Not today, but down the line, in a few months, when college comes for all of them.

The engine roars to life and the radio clicks on with, "*Unit four, repeat. You're telling me there's a body in the woods?*"

"*That's exactly what I'm saying. There's a body in the woods–*"

It's Stiles that turns the radio off. For a moment, they all just stare at each other. Then, there's laughter and the engine groans with life as they tear out of the parking lot and onto the road. And then they just keep driving.

Chapter End Notes

One season to go!

Said the Spider to the Fly

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 11

Word count: 11,162

Isaac's suitcase is halfway to packed, but it's been that way for the better part of two hours. He *thought* that having company would make the time go faster, help him zone into the task without being pulled in the direction of wayward thoughts, but, instead, Scott's only serving as a distraction.

He's rolled over in Isaac's bed, feet up near the pillow and head tipped over the edge. (Isaac pointedly isn't thinking about that one sleepover and that one hypothetical question.)

"Which books are you gonna bring?" Scott asks.

Isaac shrugs, letting his eyes cast to his overrun bookshelf. He knows he has to be selective about which ones he brings, especially with the limited space of a dorm room.

"I don't know," he admits. "I probably won't bring Laura's though. I mean... I just think Derek might want them." He shrugs again, "Maybe I'll start my own collection."

Scott makes a little humming noise of acknowledgement, then, "Hey, Iz?"

Isaac turns away from the shelf and back to Scott, to the warm brown of his eyes and the effervescent light of his lopsided, upside down smile. "Yeah?"

"C'mere," Scott whispers. His voice is soft with the slightest lilt of affection simmering beneath the surface.

Isaac doesn't press up from the ground, simply slides across the hardwood floor, closing the two foot distance between them. Scott looks like he's going to roll over, spin onto his front, but Isaac doesn't let him. He puts a hand at the center of Scott's chest, not applying any pressure, just the faint weight of his touch. His hand traces a circle there, rubbing it into Scott's skin.

Then, he leans in to kiss him. Maybe it's the novelty of kissing upside down or maybe it's just the fact that it's *Scott*, but it feels like the first time all over again. It's been three months since that day in the woods, and yet the flutter of excitement in Isaac's stomach hasn't eased or faded in the slightest.

It's an awkward angle, upside down as they are, so Isaac keeps the kiss brief. It's just a peck of lips and then Isaac is pushing back and grinning at Scott.

Scott stares up at him, laughing a little fondly, "Did you just – Did you just Spider-Man kiss me?"

Isaac feels his cheeks go flush with a silly mixture of embarrassment and adoration. He bites the inside of his lip, releases it, and admits with a faux-indifferent shrug of, "Your boyfriend's a nerd, you should be used to this by now."

Scott sighs a little longingly. Then, "Okay, let me roll over, the blood is really rushing to my head now."

Isaac lets his hand drag off Scott's chest, only lingering for a moment longer than necessary. Scott flips over onto his stomach, but doesn't stay up on the bed. He seems to think about it for a moment, but then he makes up his mind and clumsily climbs down from the mattress to join Isaac on the floor. He leans into his space, resting his head on Isaac's shoulder.

Isaac's smiling brighter than the sun. (*He* should be used to this by now. Scott can never seem to help himself where Isaac is involved. It's always a hand on his shoulder, an arm around his waist, a tugging at his sleeve. It's like he can't bear to keep the distance between them. And Isaac's not complaining, not in the slightest. He *should* be used to this by now, but he just isn't. He's not sure he ever will be.)

"You've barely packed anything since I got here," Scott observes. There's a hint of humor to his voice, a teasing depth to it.

Isaac digs his elbow into Scott's ribs, just enough to make him inhale a little sharply. "Yeah, and whose fault is that?"

"Yours," Scott answers sweetly.

Isaac elbows him again, making an affronted noise in the back of his throat.

“What! It’s not *my fault* I’m irresistible,” Scott says, but he’s already giggling, undermining the statement and saving himself from a third elbow. (Isaac has a weakness for Scott and his laugh, sue him.)

“You’re unbearable,” Isaac deadpans. But his heart goes haywire in his chest as soon as the words have crossed his lips.

Scott merely hums and shuffles a little further into Isaac, like he’s trying to bury himself in his shoulder and in his company. Isaac feels a little overly warm, but he doesn’t protest and he doesn’t comment. Instead, he lets his hand slip around Scott’s back, tucking a grip into his hip.

It’s nice, this easy affection between them. For so long, Isaac felt like he was holding himself back, like he was fighting against his instincts. And, now, he doesn’t have to restrain himself anymore. Now, he’s free to let that filter go, to give into the cravings of his heart.

It’s then that Scott’s phone buzzes in his pocket, interrupting the quiet peace of Isaac’s bedroom with harsh vibrations against hard floors. Scott pulls away from Isaac, but only enough to wriggle his phone free, once it’s in his hand he’s back to leaning up against him.

“It’s Liam,” Scott says, even though Isaac can plainly see his phone screen, can easily read the text reminding Scott about his last night as assistant coach of the Beacon Hills High School lacrosse team. There’s a snarky warning in it, something about making sure not to let Isaac distract *him*. (And isn’t that a wonder. As distracting as Isaac finds Scott, the feeling is mutual.)

Scott types out a quick reply and then his phone fades back to his lock screen, to the analog clock inching towards evening, to that *ridiculous* picture.

“I thought you were going to change that,” Isaac grumbles.

It’s the photo of Isaac on Aiden’s motorcycle, from all the way back in junior year. And it’s so stupid – the fact that Scott has saved the picture for years, that he’s held onto it for so long, that he’s made it the background of his phone. It’s sentimental and embarrassing and Isaac *hates* it.

“No,” Scott counters. “You told me to change it and assumed I would listen. Turns out,” he laughs a little, “I didn’t.”

Isaac tips his head back against the edge of his bed and groans a

guttural sound. (The thing is: he doesn't hate it. This aching part of him is almost *pleased* – at the implications of Scott saving and cherishing the first picture of Isaac to ever come into his phone.)

"Get going then," Isaac says softly, once he's brought his head back to neutral. "I know you haven't even *started* packing yet."

Scott frowns. "But this is so much more fun."

Isaac kisses him then. It's a little longer than the one before, but still just as gentle. There's a reassurance in the point of contact, in the glide of Isaac's hand over Scott's jaw.

It's Scott who breaks the kiss, like if he doesn't end it now then he'll stay here forever. And Isaac would let him, is the thing. He would let Scott sit on his bedroom floor for the rest of time if it meant staying in the pull of his gravity.

Scott claps his hands against his legs and says, "Okay, yeah. I should, I should—" He tosses a thumb over his shoulder, towards the spiral stairs and the exit of the loft.

Isaac nods, "I'll call you later."

Scott smiles. Then, he darts a kiss to Isaac's cheek and down the stairs before Isaac can even really process it. He balls his hands into fists to repress the urge to touch the warm spot of Scott's lips, but he can do nothing to fight his smile.

—

Isaac shouldn't be listening to this. He thought Scott would leave right away, but he's lingering downstairs and he's talking to Derek.

"Um. In case – In case I don't see you tomorrow, I just."

Scott heaves a heavy sort of sigh. Isaac can imagine the scrunch of his brows and the rubbing at the back of his neck.

"Scott, you don't have to say anything."

Derek sounds reasonably calm, but Isaac can spot his anxiety a mile away. It's not hard for Isaac to note the ever-so-slight tightening of his voice and the shake of discomfort in his heart.

"No. No, I do. It's – I'm." Scott exhales again, and then, all in one breath, *"I just wanted to say thank you."*

For a moment, Isaac is met with silence. The loft goes quiet for nothing but three heartbeats and three not quite stable breaths. Isaac is waiting for Derek to say something, to have some sort of reaction, but nothing comes. And, of course, it's Scott that continues.

"For everything you've done for me and – and especially for Isaac."

And, now, Isaac really wishes he wasn't listening. Because it's not embarrassment that swirls in him, it's just something fond and enamored, some shared love for both of them. There's something pleasant in the care they hold for him, in the fact that Isaac knows, without doubt or apprehension, that they both love him.

"We've come a long way," Derek says. There's something humble there, but also something proud. It's a messy contradiction that shouldn't exist, but it does. It's a reminder of what they've been through together and how much they've grown through the process – the things Derek is still ashamed of doing and the things he never thought he would've accomplished.

Scott doesn't say anything else and neither does Derek. However the exchange is ended, whatever happens in the two minutes of silence before the sliding door creaks open, Isaac will never know and he'll never ask.

—

Isaac keeps trying to pack, but he's not making much headway. He didn't realize how exhausting moving would be now that he actually has *stuff*. Before, he only had a handful of personal belongings to cart from Point A to Point B. Now, in the almost two years since returning to the loft, he's acquired more *things* than he knows what to do with.

(And it's still not much, if he's honest. But it's more than he's had since he was a child and he doesn't know how to feel about that, doesn't know how to address this *leaving home* feeling that's settled in his chest.)

Isaac gives up when his stomach starts to growl and his knees start to ache from kneeling on the floor for too long.

He trails down the spiral stairs to find Derek in the kitchen with a pot of water boiling on the stove. Isaac leans against the counter, asks, "What're you making?"

"Spaghetti," Derek answers simply. "Is that okay?"

“Can we eat on the couch?”

“No.”

“It’s my last night.”

“No.”

Isaac sighs, but doesn’t protest further. He helps with the last few bits of dinner and, when a bowl is placed into his hands, he takes it directly to the couch without a glance over his shoulder. Derek whispers complaints under his breath, but follows Isaac to the open living room without any real fuss.

Isaac tries to not to think about this being their last night in the loft together, if only because it hurts in ways he’s never experienced before, if only because he doesn’t want to cry into his pasta.

“So,” Derek says around a mouthful (because for all his talk of manners, he’s really just a huge hypocrite). “About Laura’s books.”

Isaac’s fork clangs against the plastic – because glass would never survive the kind of fights that tend to happen here – of his bowl. He swallows thickly and forces a casual, “What about them?”

And Isaac knows Derek has seen through him at once, knows Derek can tell he’s faking his nonchalance, but he doesn’t comment on it, not fully. He just says, “I think you should take them.”

Isaac shakes his head, “No, Derek–”

“They’ll be of more use to you than me,” Derek says. He’s mindlessly twirling spaghetti around his fork, but he doesn’t make any moves to take another bite. He’s staring at the swirl of red sauce with unnecessary focus. “They’re just going to collect dust if you leave them here. Laura would’ve wanted them to be read. And... they’ll still be in the family if you take them.”

Isaac pointedly does not choke on his pasta. He knows exactly what Derek is getting at. It’s completely obvious and not even an implication at this point. He’s outright saying that he sees Isaac as family. And, though it’s been true – on both sides – for ages, neither one has ever put it into words like this.

Isaac isn’t ready to do so. Because, if he does, he’ll be opening up a can of emotions that he doesn’t know what to do with. He’s not ready

to address the painful weight between them. So, he keeps it light and says, “You really shouldn’t eavesdrop like that.”

Derek laughs. And it’s not forced or faked. It’s like he knew Isaac was going to deflect, like he can see through to the acceptance underneath, the unspoken form of, *okay, I’ll take them.*

“Right, so, we’re just gonna pretend that you weren’t also listening in on me and Scott’s goodbye?”

Isaac shrugs. “I don’t have a door and you weren’t being quiet.”

“And now you know how I’ve felt for the past two years of nightly phone calls,” Derek says.

Isaac laughs. “Well, you’ll only have to suffer through one more.”

—

As promised, Isaac calls Scott as evening turns to night time, as the sky darkens fully and stars pop into view.

“Hey,” Scott answers. Isaac immediately hears tension in his tone. “So, we kind of have a problem?”

Isaac wants to throw his phone across the room and ignore every word out of Scott’s mouth until they’ve crossed over the property line of Beacon Hills. He doesn’t, of course, but it’s a near thing.

“What? No ‘how was your evening, Isaac?’ or ‘I missed you’? Just straight into more supernatural bullshit?”

Scott gives a laugh, but there’s tightness to it. He says, “*Sorry. How was your evening, Isaac? I missed you – even though it’s only been, like, five hours.*”

Isaac exhales a scoff of laughter, “No, never mind. I need to know: what’s going on?”

Scott sounds apologetic when he speaks, “*I’m not actually sure if it’s a big deal, but there was this wolf that came onto the lacrosse field – almost attacked us, I think. Uh, Liam and I followed it out into the woods and we found a whole pack of them. All dead and all covered in spiders.*”

Isaac frowns and closes his mouth against a sigh, doesn’t let it slip past his lips. “But they were just wolves, right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I think so.” Scott sounds so tired and Isaac wants nothing more than to wrap him up in his arms and protect him from the ever taking of Beacon Hills.

“Okay, so, walk me through it. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking: I thought there weren’t wolves in California. And, also, remember what happened before the Darach? The way animals were the first to react to the waking of the nemeton?”

Isaac takes the words into consideration, lets them spin in his mind and sink into recognition. Scott has something of a point. *But*. “Okay, the worry that this could be *more* is completely understandable, but I’m just – I don’t think it’s really *our* problem anymore.”

“But... how? How can it not be up to us?” Scott protests. *“It’s always up to us.”*

“Exactly,” Isaac says. “And, now, it’s someone else’s turn to figure this out, okay?” Then, “Nothing bad has happened yet and it’s just some dead wolves. Sure, that’s not great, but there’s nothing there to *fight*. I mean, what are you going to do? Wait here for evil spiders to start attacking?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Scott,” Isaac levels. “You don’t see it now because it’s all you’ve known for years, but... you need to stop fighting every single battle you can find. It all seems normal because we’re still in the thick of it, but this? This thing that we’ve been doing, risking our lives constantly? It’s not – It’s not normal.”

“But what if I’m not meant for normal?”

Isaac makes a pitiful sort of noise in the back of his throat. But he doesn’t give into it. He knows that, right now, Scott doesn’t need to be convinced because he won’t believe a word Isaac says. He knows that, for now, the best thing he can do is diffuse the situation, even if it breaks him a little to brush it all aside so carelessly.

“That’s just the savior complex talking.”

Scott laughs. And, though there’s still a soft tone of insecurity, it sounds genuine, sounds more relaxed. Scott sighs and Isaac hears rustling as he moves around in his bed. *“I can’t believe this is our last night in Beacon Hills.”*

"I didn't think I was ever going to leave this town," Isaac says, staring up at the ceiling. He's dipping into a dangerous sort of territory here, the kind of thoughts he doesn't want to face. But the thing is: he knows he has to. (Eventually.) There's a timeline to these feelings poisoning his veins and souring his lungs. (But they've still got a good twenty-four hours before the deadline. So.)

"Yeah," Scott says. "*It doesn't feel real yet.*"

And Isaac knows exactly what he means. Because, though most of his belongings are packed away and he *knows* they're supposed to set out tomorrow evening, it just doesn't feel like it's really going to happen. Isaac doesn't know how to explain it, he just knows that he hasn't quite accepted that *this is it*.

"I'm scared," Isaac whispers into the dark.

"*Me too,*" Scott whispers back.

That's all Isaac needs, really. There's something in knowing that he's not embarking on this journey alone. Because, as different as he and Scott are, they both feel intrinsically tied to this town, to the purpose that they've found here. They both wonder what they'll become without this place to shape them. They've never really had a chance to find out who they are without the pressing urgency of survival, and the thought of doing so is terrifying. But it's also... *exciting*.

Leaving is going to hurt, Isaac knows. It's going to make him crumble and break, but it's also going to heal parts of him he didn't even know needed healing. It's going to be a good thing. Or, at least, that's what Isaac is telling himself.

Isaac feels a little numb around the edges. He slept fine and the day has been fine, but it's his *last* day. Everything is a potential final moment and Isaac can't handle it, can't bear the weight of anticipation.

"Hey, Derek?" Isaac calls as he jogs down the spiral stairs. "Stiles is going to be here in a few minutes to give me a ride to the comic store, and then he's gonna pass over the keys to the Jeep."

Derek gets this strange look across his face, something warped with amusement and something a little less positive, something a little sad. He doesn't speak on it though, merely says, "You're seriously taking

the Jeep?”

Isaac frowns. “It’s a free car.”

“More like a free death trap,” Derek corrects, mumbling only a little.

Isaac stares at him with a blank face. Because he knows Derek is being a pain in the ass on purpose, because he knows there’s something nicer hidden under the snark.

“You know,” Derek says, going for casual but missing horribly, “I could drive you up there. It’s not that far.”

“What, and help us move into our dorm?” Isaac asks with his arms crossed over his chest and a teasing tilt to his voice.

Derek shrugs and takes it more seriously than intended, fumbling with the expanse of his feelings, “I don’t know. Maybe. I–”

“I’m gonna miss you too, Derek,” Isaac says, cutting him off and putting him out of his misery.

Because it’s not the loft that Isaac is scared to leave. The building is full of memories, sure, but not all of them are good. Isaac doesn’t mind the prospect of never living in this particular space again, but the thought of never living with *Derek* again...

That’s where Isaac’s feelings go wrought with pain.

Because Derek is Isaac’s family, whether he’s willing to say it out loud or not. There’s safety in coming home to him, in knowing that he always has him to lean on. They’ve found connection in each other, connection that neither one has experienced since they were kids. And to leave that behind, even if it’s only to move a couple hours away, it’s a big deal.

Isaac is trying to be ready for it, but he’s not convinced that he is.

“I’ve gotten used to you being here, it’s... it’s gonna feel so empty without you.”

And Isaac knows that Derek isn’t really ready either. They’ve been building to this moment all summer, and, yet, Isaac wants to cling to it a little longer.

“I’ll visit all the time,” Isaac says, but his voice breaks against the words. His breath shudders in his chest and his heart burns with the

pain of this moment. (And it's silly because Isaac will be coming back to the loft after his shift. This isn't his last moment with Derek, but he can't delay the tide of emotions any longer.)

Derek draws Isaac into a hug. Like, properly grabs his wrist and full body *tugs* him close. And Isaac goes without protest, lets himself fall into Derek, into the familiarity and the comfort.

"I'm so proud of you," Derek whispers.

And Isaac's crying before he even realizes, tears spilling over his cheeks and soaking into Derek's shirt.

"Me too," Isaac says, voice a breath of a whisper.

Because he is. He's so proud of Derek. He's proud of all he's done to be a better person, not just for Isaac and the protection of Beacon Hills, but for his own happiness and well-being. He's changed so much from the brooding loner he was when Isaac first met him, when he first offered him the bite.

Isaac's changed a lot since then too. He's no longer a mirror image of whatever authority has a grip on him. He's become his own person. He's stepped into his identity and now he's stepping out of his comfort zone, out of the loft and out of Beacon Hills.

And he might not be ready, but it's time.

The door of the loft opens with a metallic squeak and Isaac and Derek fly apart before they can even register it.

But it's just Stiles. He's standing in the door with his jaw dropped open and a flicker of amusement in his eyes. (And Isaac sincerely regrets sharing the door code with him.)

"Holy *shit*. What did I just walk into? Are you *crying*?"

Isaac hastily wipes away his tears, but he quickly realizes that Stiles isn't talking to him. He's talking to Derek and the red rims of his eyes.

"Why didn't you just text me you were here!" Isaac spouts, but it's barely a question and it's protective in nature, a deflection to move past the hurt in Derek's chemosignals and the sadness in the furrow of his brows.

"I wanted to say goodbye to the loft!" Stiles says, sweeping his arms

out in a grand gesture.

“Oh, yeah, because you’ve spent so much time here,” Isaac grumbles, crossing the expanse of the loft in a few long strides. He catches on Stiles’ wrist, and says, “C’mon, we’re going.”

“Don’t be such a sourwolf!” Stiles protests, even as he allows himself to be dragged over the threshold and out the door.

—

The comic store is fairly empty, as it usually is. Honestly, Isaac is a little surprised that they’re able to stay in business, but he figures that’s not really his problem anymore. For now, he just enjoys the quiet of the space and the easy camaraderie of Stiles’ presence.

“But, really though, is Derek, y’know, gonna be okay?” Stiles asks. He has a Batman figurine in his hands, spinning it around and fiddling mindlessly.

Isaac shrugs. “He’s adaptable. He’ll get used to it. I think he’s just kind of... lonely.”

“Great,” Stiles says, slamming the action figure down on the counter with more force than it deserves. “Last time he was lonely he went around turning a bunch of teenagers into werewolves.”

“Yes,” Isaac says in monotone. “And we’re very glad he did.”

Stiles tips his head back with his laughter.

—

“Hey,” Stiles says. He’s lingering in the store longer than Isaac thought he would. Either he’s milking the time they have left or Lydia is running late. Regardless, Isaac’s not complaining. “You know what conversation we haven’t had yet?”

Isaac hums in question, but continues restacking comics and organizing the shelves, only looking over his shoulder for a brief moment, to take in the casual slant of Stiles’ face and the ease of friendship.

“What’s your sexuality?” Stiles asks. Then, like he immediately regrets it, “I mean, if you – if you want to tell me, that is. Obviously, I’m not – You’re,” Stiles points at him and it’s so awkwardly fumbling and so

perfectly in character, “*You’re* not entitled to tell me.”

“Relax,” Isaac says with a soft breath of laughter at the familiarity of it all. He places the last comic on the shelf and turns to face Stiles fully now, shoving his hands in the pockets of his sweater. “I don’t really know. I haven’t really thought about it. There’s never—”

“If you’re about to say some *corny* shit like ‘there’s never been anyone but Scott’ *please* save your breath,” Stiles rants. “I really don’t want to have to puke on you right now.”

Isaac shrugs. (Because that’s exactly what he was going to say, but it feels stupid now.)

Stiles shrugs back. And, “Seriously? You never thought about it? What about when you first realized you loved Scott?” (And Stiles says it so simply, even though Isaac still hasn’t managed to bring those words from his lips, even though that’s another area of vulnerability that Isaac is still avoiding. He just isn’t quite ready for *that*.) “You didn’t have a whole big crisis?”

There were a lot of other things going on when Isaac first figured it out. He was a little more preoccupied with Scott dying and Theo and the rift in the pack. The circumstances were too intense for something as mundane as *sexuality*.

Isaac doesn’t say that though, just, “I mean. I was freaking out about being in love with Scott, but I don’t know. His gender never seemed like a big deal. It’s not about that, I guess. It’s just. I fell for Scott because of the person he is.”

“Well,” Stiles says, leaning against the counter as Isaac wraps around to stand behind it once more. “I don’t want to tell you what to think or force you into a box or anything, *but...* that kinda sounds like you might be pansexual.”

Isaac’s nose wrinkles and eyebrows draw together in confusion.

“You can Google it,” Stiles says, like a suggestion, “but my understanding is pansexual is when you like someone regardless of gender.”

“Oh,” Isaac says. “Yeah. I guess that does sound like me.”

Stiles narrows his eyes. “You’re going to start using that label without doing any research just because I told you it fits, aren’t you?”

Isaac pales a little, gives a drawn out, “Nooo.”

Stiles laughs. And it’s maybe a little condescending, but it’s mostly just Stiles, just the two of them and their usual bark with no bite.

“Aren’t you going to ask me what *my* sexuality is?” Stiles says, pressing a little closer over the glass of the counter, trying to invade Isaac’s personal space despite the physical barrier between them.

“Did you want me to?”

Stiles shrugs. “It’s not like it’s a huge secret or anything. Whoop-de-doo. Water is wet, Stiles Stilinski is bisexual.”

Isaac doesn’t laugh because he doesn’t think he should, even if Stiles is the one making a joke of it. Still, he says, “*Is* water wet though?” (Because he’s insufferable and this is what his relationship with Stiles is, a push and pull.)

“Do *not* start with me, Isaac. I just *bared my soul* and you’re going to pull that shit with me?” Stiles says, puffing up his chest like he’s genuinely offended, but they both know it’s a ruse. “You’re not even going to ask who my first boy crush was?”

Isaac levels him with an unimpressed stare and, “It was Scott, wasn’t it?”

Stiles’ jaw *drops*. His volume spikes, shouting too loud even for an empty store, “*How* do you know that! I’ve never told anyone. I – I was gonna lie and say it was Danny!”

Isaac laughs a little, at the pure distress in Stiles’ voice, but, mostly, he just shrugs.

“You don’t look threatened,” Stiles says, slumping back to normal height and normal volume. There’s a hint of confusion to his words. “I think you should be threatened. I could steal Scott from you so fast.”

Isaac rolls his eyes. “I’d like to see you try.”

Stiles crosses his arms over his chest and tips his weight back. He jabs another pointed finger towards Isaac and, “I don’t like this.”

Isaac rolls his eyes and admits, “Scott told me you were his first kiss. He confessed it like he had cheated on me on our first date. It was so funny.”

Isaac laughs a little fondly at the memory, at the table of the Mexican restaurant and the pure guilt in Scott's eyes. (The moment before the confession wasn't quite as fun. The earth shattering fear in Isaac's heart that Scott had changed his mind, that he had decided this thing between them wasn't worth it. But then, in one breath, he whispered the truth about the kiss like it was a sin. And Isaac had nearly choked from his laughter.)

"I didn't like him then! We were just curious!" Stiles claims, like the distinction is important to make. "The crush was just, like, this one week when we were thirteen. But then I realized Scott's kind of gross and moved on to bigger and better men."

"Like Danny?" Isaac teases. (Because, again, *insufferable*.)

"I'm convinced if the twins hadn't come to town something would've happened between us," Stiles says. And Isaac can tell he's being fully honest, not only by the steady tick of his heartbeat, but by the uncertain gleam in his eyes.

Isaac doesn't really know how to react to that, so he just stands there, staring at Stiles with nothing to say.

"Don't make that face at me!" Stiles complains. "I'm being serious! There was – There was tension!"

"My face is completely blank," Isaac says, but then his mouth twitches up into a half-smile and Stiles is flipping him off with two hands.

—

Isaac hears Lydia's car pull up outside of the shop, but she doesn't get out and she doesn't come into the store. Isaac is grateful, if only because he needs this moment with Stiles.

"Okay," he says, fishing around in his pocket and pulling out his keys with a jingle of metal. The green bottle opener keychain is still hanging with the rest. "Um. Here."

Stiles basically throws the keys at Isaac, like this is just an average day, like he isn't semi-permanently passing over the Jeep that belonged to his mom.

"Stiles..." Isaac says, voice softer than is really sustainable. "You can back out now. I won't be offended."

It's the honest truth. He knows how important this car is to Stiles, he knows what it means to give it up. Isaac knows that by doing this, Stiles is letting go of so much. And, by doing this, he's putting so much of his trust in Isaac.

It makes Isaac all too aware of how far they've come too. It took them a long while to trust each other, but, now, it's one of the strongest bonds Isaac holds. Now, this trust is part of what anchors Isaac to his humanity.

"No," Stiles says quickly. "No, I – I want to do this. It's just... hard."

Isaac nods. He doesn't really get it, doesn't really have the experience to relate to, but he can see it in Stiles. He can see the pain behind his eyes and the longing to hold tight to that hunk of metal.

"I'll send you pictures once a week," Isaac offers. It's mostly a joke to ease that sadness, but they both know that Isaac would do it if asked. He'd send Stiles photos of the Jeep *every single day* if it would make him feel better.

"Yeah?" Stiles says. And his face lights up a little with it.

"Yeah," Isaac says.

Stiles clears his throat. He looks over his shoulder, through the glass of the window and into the parking lot. "Lydia's–"

"She can wait for a few minutes, Stiles, just," Isaac clears his throat. "Just let me say this?"

"You don't need to say goodbye right now, we're going to see each other la–"

"*Stiles.*"

Stiles sighs, but stops fighting it. Isaac knows it's only the discomfort of leaving. And a little bit of denial as well, probably. Because it's Stiles, so, of course, he's in denial.

"I'm going to miss you," Isaac says. His voice is even with his words despite the way it hurts to say it, to make it true. He can't wait for all of this moving to be over, just to get past the initial heartbreak, just so he can stop saying goodbye. Because he *hates* goodbye. "But the distance isn't going to mean *shit*, okay? You're too important to be a circumstantial friend. I don't care how far apart or how busy we get,

you're always going to be my best friend and you're *never* getting rid of me."

And there's a little bit of anger there, but it's not directed *at* Stiles. It's determination with a hint of something bitter, something that tastes like all the people Isaac has lost before, all the circumstances completely out of his control.

Stiles gives a weak sort of laugh, almost a little shocked, "Yeah." He nods emphatically, "Yeah, you're my best friend too. Unfortunately. All of this was entirely against my will, you know? You just wormed your way in and now I'm attached to you, so, yeah, you're, like—"

"Hey, Stiles," Isaac says. "You're rambling."

He nods. "Right. Just." He swallows. "My point is! I love you and I'm gonna miss you."

It's still a little hard to say, but Isaac does it anyway. Because he knows it's what's needed. And also because, despite the residual hurt, he *wants* to say it. So, he gives a weak, "I love you too."

Lydia honks the horn and the moment shatters, but that's okay because they got everything that they needed.

—

Isaac isn't expecting any more visitors at the comic store, but he gets one anyway. The bell dings overhead and the door opens to a sheepish looking Corey, ducking in past the glass and standing in the entrance.

"Hi."

"Hey, Corey?" Isaac says, a questioning inflection to his words. "I didn't know you were coming by."

Corey shrugs. "It wasn't really planned, I just – I know you're leaving soon. So."

Isaac nods. He feels something warm swelling in his chest, that Corey went out of his way to come here, to come say some goodbye to Isaac.

"Did Scott tell you about the wolves?" Corey asks as he approaches the counter. His tone is casual and Isaac knows Corey's not seeking anything from him, he's just making conversation and also maybe

conveying some lingering nervousness.

“Yeah, he did,” Isaac says. Then, “I wouldn’t be too worried about it right now though. Not until there’s some kind of pattern. Just know that Derek is still around and I can help remotely with research and–”

Corey breaks off into a smile. It makes Isaac’s words die in his throat as he quirks an eyebrow in confusion.

“What?” Isaac asks, a little slow with it.

“It’s just... it’s nice that you care so much,” Corey says with a small shrug and a smaller smile. “I mean, I know I have Mason and maybe also Liam too, but... it’s nice knowing that I have you too.”

Isaac feels his heart break in the best way. Because he understands so completely. Because he has Scott and Stiles to turn to, but he has Derek too. And he’ll always need him in a different sort of way.

“You can call for anything at any time, okay?” Isaac says.

Corey nods, “Okay.”

—

Isaac rings up his final customer and then puts an end to his final shift. He’s closing the shop today, so there’s no one else around. It’s just him and the comics and the bell of the door ringing overhead.

Isaac steps out onto the vacant sidewalk and locks the door behind him.

It’s strange, leaving this part of Beacon Hills behind. The comic store is one of the only places that Isaac felt connected to both before and after accepting the bite, it’s one of the only places that he came back to without excruciating sadness. He was able to forge something of a future here, or, at the very least, something of a present.

And, now, as Isaac removes his name tag and steps out into the parking lot, he’s saying goodbye to the days of old and the new. He’s saying goodbye to the memories of Camden, but also the memories of Stiles and Scott and, *“because I trust you.”*

It’s hard to close this chapter, knowing that, while he might return to the shop, he’ll never work here again. It wasn’t Isaac’s first job – that accolade will always belong to the nights of the cemetery – but it’s the

first one he chose for himself, the first job he ever enjoyed.

Working at the comic store granted Isaac independence when he really needed it, when he needed something of just his own. And so, it's hard to turn his back on that.

But the Jeep comes into view and Isaac closes the last few feet of distance. And he doesn't delay in pulling the keys out of his pocket with a familiar jingle, slotting the metal into the lock and climbing into the driver's side

Isaac slams the door closed and the visor falls from the ceiling and into his lap with an unceremonious *thump*.

There's a note attached to the visor, secured with a line of gray duct tape and Stiles' messy scrawl, reading with, *be gentle*.

Isaac laughs a little, lighthearted and warm at the way Stiles knows not only his car, but Isaac so well. For now, he sets the visor in the passenger seat – he'll put it back up once he's home – and turns the key in the ignition.

Luckily, the Jeep rumbles to life without hesitation or issue.

Isaac can feel himself grinning as he pulls out of the parking lot and onto the roads. It's not Isaac's first time driving the Jeep – Stiles made him do test runs over the summer to ensure *his baby* was going to a safe home – but it's the first time that it's just him.

It's just Isaac, driving a car that means so much to Stiles and that now belongs to him.

—

Isaac takes the elevator up to the loft. Because that's something he can do now, without even a hitch of breath or a trembling of his fingertips. Ever since he got in that freezer to save Stiles' life, his claustrophobia has eased. It's not perfect, of course – it never will be. But it's better. And Isaac revels in it while he can, while his breath and heart stay steady.

Isaac inserts the code and unlocks the door to the loft, letting himself back in for the last time. (Well, not the *last time*. Isaac isn't so disillusioned that he thinks he'll never be back here. But it's the last time for a while and possibly the last time that Isaac lives here.)

Derek is inside, just as expected. He's carried a box down from Isaac's room. He doesn't miss the label that reads: **BOOKS**.

Isaac smiles a little, but it's sad around the edges and they both know it.

But there's still a couple more hours before Isaac has to meet the others at the McCall house, so, until then, he's going to make every second count. (Though he's not entirely sure how he's going to do that. Probably just spend time with Derek. On the couch, of course. Because if there's anything about the loft that Isaac is going to miss the most, it's definitely *not* Derek.)

"I'm surprised you made it here in one piece," Derek jabs. And, "Good last shift?"

Isaac flops down on the couch with a half-hearted chuckle, saying, "Yeah." And there's a nostalgic note to his voice, something already a little reminiscent. He tries to cover it up with, "Corey stopped by. I told him you'd be around if any supernatural shit started happening."

Derek nods his agreement but his eyebrows are furrowed. "Is there something I *should* be worried about already?"

Isaac shrugs. "There was this thing with a dead pack of wolves covered in spiders, right in the woods off the lacrosse field."

Isaac tries to play it casual, but he knows his voice gives him away. There's a pointed implication in those words, a generic answer of *yes* and a feeling of foreboding.

"Isaac," Derek says, and there's no denying the warning in his tone. "I'll keep an eye on it, but *you* should be focused on college."

Isaac sighs, running a hand through his hair. "I know that. It's just... it's hard to focus on school when so many people I care about are here in Beacon Hills."

"We already did the sentimental thing," Derek deflects. "*But*," he says, "you know, speaking of people you care about..."

Derek trails off and stares at Isaac, like he's expecting him to magically understand the vague insinuation there. Isaac definitely doesn't and he's definitely a little concerned for what's about to come out of Derek's mouth.

“Is there anything you would maybe want to go get from your old house?”

And Isaac’s heart splinters. He wasn’t expecting that, he wasn’t prepared for that, he doesn’t know how to *deal* with that. His breathing goes a little shallow and he shakes his head quickly, “Derek, no. It was – It was hard enough last time. I...”

“Okay,” Derek says easily, putting a comforting hand on Isaac’s shoulder. “Sorry, I should have brought it up more gently. I just – The house isn’t going to be abandoned forever.”

Isaac nods. He knows that. He *knows*.

“I know,” Isaac says. “But I don’t really care what happens to the shit there. It’s – It’s not mine anymore.”

Derek audibly swallows. And Isaac knows he’s scared to ask his next question, but he does it anyway, gives a soft, “There’s nothing of Camden’s?”

Isaac’s next exhale comes a little shuddering. There’s no avoiding the ache that spreads through his lungs, wrapping around him like a vice, but, still, he only says, “No. I – I think it’s better if I don’t know where his stuff ends up.” He shakes his head again, “I couldn’t even go in his room when I visited last time. I... I barely remember what’s in there and I don’t know if I need the reminder.”

Isaac knows why Derek is doing this. He understands that Derek wants to make sure that Isaac doesn’t have any regrets, especially not with his brother. He wants to ensure that Isaac doesn’t miss any opportunities while he still has them, but that doesn’t make this any easier. It doesn’t stop the clotting of pain in his chest, the searing grief in the gap between his ribs.

Isaac gives a final, “I want a fresh start. And I can’t have that if I’m lugging around his stuff.”

“You could leave it here, if you wanted,” Derek offers. There’s a sincerity to his voice, something tender and careful. “I mean, you’re taking Laura’s books. I could keep Camden’s comics.”

Isaac wants to bury his head in his hands and never see the light of day again.

“Derek,” he says, as firm but still kind as he can manage. “I appreciate

what you're trying to do, but I *can't*. I'm supposed to be at Scott's in," he checks the time, "an hour and a half. I've said three different goodbyes already today. It's... It's *too* much. If – If you're still worried or if I change my mind, we can go together during winter break, okay?"

"Okay," Derek gives easily, sounding only a little chastened.

And, because Isaac doesn't want to leave it on such a sour note, he says, "Besides, if anybody's getting any of Camden's stuff, it's Jordan."

Derek laughs.

"But, um," Isaac whispers. "Maybe you could go sometime and find some pictures? I promised Scott I'd show him a photo of Cam sometime."

Derek nods, "Yeah, of course, I can do that. You want me to invite Parrish? We can go on a little field trip together?"

And Isaac knows he's joking, but he just nods anyway. "Sure, Derek."

Derek smiles and ruffles Isaac's hair.

—

Isaac is still sitting on the couch with Derek, basking in the last couple hours of his presence, when his phone buzzes and lights with a text. Isaac drags it off the coffee table and into his hands. In an instant, his heart is in his throat.

I'm working a shift, so I won't be able to see you off in person, but I wanted to make sure I said this to you. I'm so proud of how much you've grown since you first showed up dripping wet on my doorstep. You've really come into your own since then and I can't wait to see all the wonderful things you do.

Thank you for making Scott smile. Look after him, will you? And take care of yourself too. I love you.

— M

The signature is completely unnecessary. It's the final cruel cherry on top of Isaac's overwhelming and unbalanced sadness. He blinks and the overflow finally happens. Tears spill down and over his cheeks,

one falling on his screen and turning the words to a blur.

Isaac tips his head back against the couch with a muffled whine of pain. It just keeps getting harder. Every time he thinks the goodbyes are done, every time he thinks the uncomfortable moments have ended, another pops up in his face.

Isaac can smell Derek's concern and confusion, so, in lieu of a verbal explanation, he passes over his phone.

Derek doesn't say anything, but Isaac knows the text has been read because he makes a soft noise and drags Isaac into his space, throwing his arm over his shoulder and tugging him in close, like Isaac is something that can be protected.

And he won't notice it until later, but Derek has typed out his own response, a message that reads: **You made him cry. He loves you too. — Derek**

—

Isaac tucks his ring daggers and Camden's birthday card carefully into the front pocket of his suitcase. And then, that's it. He's all packed and it's time to go. All his belongings are shoved in two boxes and a suitcase – a big step up from his duffel bag of the past.

Isaac stands in the doorway of the loft and he's trying so hard not to cry again. The place doesn't look any more empty than it did five minutes ago, but Isaac knows that this is it. He knows that the spiral staircase leads to a barren room and a mattress that is never coming back down.

"Come on, Isaac. These boxes aren't getting any lighter," Derek calls from the hall, guiding Isaac with gentle humor.

So, he tugs his suitcase past the sliding door and locks it shut behind him. He probably doesn't have to, considering Derek will be back upstairs in ten minutes tops, but there's something therapeutic in the action, in hearing the latch click loud in his ears.

Isaac's suitcase wheels squeak a little as he enters the elevator, standing at Derek's side in silence for the entire ride down to the ground floor and the Jeep in the mostly empty parking garage.

They load up the back of the car, leaving plenty of space for Scott's belongings to join his. And then...

"I don't want to say goodbye," Isaac whispers.

His chest feels heavy and his breaths feel weak and broken. He feels vulnerable and raw, like an open wound against the elements, against the sufferings of connection. And he knows this is the kind of hurt that's going to scar, that's never going to lose its sting completely. Maybe there's some reassurance in that. Or maybe it'll be only a cruel reminder. Isaac hasn't quite decided yet.

"Then we won't, okay?" Derek says. His hand is on Isaac's shoulder again, kneading a little with his grip.

Isaac shakes his head and swallows, like he's trying to clear the fog from his mind, like he's trying to focus in on this moment. And, "Don't get too lonely, okay? You can call me anytime, I'm sure my line won't be busy now that I'm living with Scott, and... and I'll drive back at least once a month or—"

"Isaac," Derek says, cutting him off gently. "I'm gonna be fine, okay?" His voice sounds wobbly and his eyes are a little glassy, but he gets the words out, says with conviction and an even heart, "I *want* you to go."

Isaac nods. He scrubs at his eyes. "I know."

"So. Drive carefully, text me when you get there – all that stuff. And," Derek tilts his head forward to make eye contact, eyes shining with green and unshed tears and the sincerest emotion Isaac has ever faced, "enjoy yourself."

Isaac nods again. He smiles wetly. "Don't throw any parties while I'm gone."

That's it. Isaac gets in the car and Derek stands in the parking garage, watching as he drives away.

—

Isaac is the first one to arrive at the McCall house. He parks the Jeep in the driveway and goes up to the front door. It's unlocked and there's a lecture in Isaac's mind, but then he presses through the threshold and he's met with Scott coming down the stairs, bag in hand and a sad frown to his lips.

"Isaac," he says. And there's something almost reverent there, something that tugs at Isaac's heart strings and makes his complaints

melt away to nothing.

“Hey,” Isaac says.

Scott drops his bag to the ground and closes the space between them, and then they're hugging. Scott's arms wrap around Isaac's shoulders and Isaac's fall around his waist. Scott's grip is tight and a little clinging, like he's holding on for all that he has.

And Isaac? Isaac isn't much better.

There's a reassurance in the press of their bodies, a reminder that, while they're adventuring into the unknown, while they're leaving behind every peace they've ever found, they're doing it together.

They're both scared and they're both sad, but they can be excited too. Because they aren't doing this alone, because they're going to have each other every step of the way. Because they're growing up and leaving home *together*. Because they're forging a life and a future *together*. And if Isaac thought seeing the end of high school was impossible, then this... this wasn't even on his radar. This was out of the question before Scott came along. This is beyond his wildest dreams.

This is pure luck and pure joy.

“Sorry,” Scott whispers, when he pulls back far enough to meet Isaac's eyes.

“Don't,” Isaac whispers in return. “I needed that too.”

And Scott knows that Isaac just said goodbye to Derek, can probably see the redness in his eyes, but he doesn't say a word about it.

For a moment, they just stand in each other's space, holding each other and taking comfort in the simple touch.

But all good things must come to an end, so Isaac points to Scott's discarded bag and says, “I'll take this to the car and you bring down the rest?”

Scott nods and they forcibly pull out of the other's embrace, parting to pack the car and prepare for their departure.

Isaac carries Scott's bag out into the night air and the driveway, opening up the back of the Jeep to shove it inside. He's just getting

the suitcase balanced so he'll still be able to see out the back window when a set of tires rumble along the gravel of the drive and bright headlights shine to blind him.

Lydia and Stiles get out of her car, and Isaac smiles and gestures towards the house, saying, "Scott's inside."

Lydia smiles back, looking cheery and a little flushed with, "I'll go get him."

She walks up the drive with a click of her shoes, leaving Stiles and Isaac alone in the driveway. And it's a little awkward, if only because they already went through their big goodbye. Isaac gets to thinking that maybe Stiles was right, maybe they should have saved the emotion for now, but then Stiles is walking up to the Jeep and saying, "Ugh. Farewell, my good friend."

He basically collapses against the side of the car, with his arms stretched wide as if he's trying to wrap the Jeep in a hug. He's faking sobs now too, chest heaving and face warped with disingenuous feelings and a dramatic display.

"Really?" Isaac deadpans, rolling his eyes and crossing his arms over his chest. "You didn't even give *me* this much energy."

Stiles springs up from the Jeep, rounding on Isaac with an offended grimace and an accusatory glare. "*You* haven't saved my life anywhere *near* as many times as Roscoe has!"

"Yes, I *have*!" Isaac counters, volume giving way and caving under Stiles' bait. "And. *Roscoe*?"

"Oh my god," Stiles says, eyes widening and head shaking rapidly. He takes a stumbling step back, like he's just been slapped across the face. He nearly topples back into the Jeep with the movement and he's yelling, "That's – That's her name! I–" He stretches out an expectant hand. "Give me the keys, right now, you don't des–"

Scott drops his second suitcase on the ground, drawing Isaac and Stiles' attention and putting their squabbling to a quickly aborted rest. Scott looks distinctly paler than he did ten minutes ago and Lydia looks decidedly less happy.

Grave and grim, Lydia says, "We can't leave."

“What do you mean? Did you forget something?” Stiles asks, but they all already know it’s something worse than that. Isaac can tell by the haunted gleam in Lydia’s eyes, the way she always looks when a premonition has just hit, when she’s witnessed something horrible.

“We can’t leave,” Lydia repeats. “Something’s wrong. Something bad is happening.”

Isaac wants to stick his fingers in his ears and close his eyes to the words. He doesn’t want to hear it. After every goodbye he said today, he deserves a get out of jail free card. He deserves some pay off for his emotional labor, but Isaac can already feel it slipping through his fingers.

“What did you see?” Scott asks.

Lydia shakes her head. Her voice comes as a squeaking in her throat, a stilted, “I – I don’t know how to explain it.”

“How about you explain it on our way out of town?” Stiles suggests. There’s a frenetic energy wound tight around him, like it’s pulling him taut and scared.

“Stiles,” Lydia repeats the movement of her head again. “We–”

Whatever Lydia was about to say – likely some talk of all the reasons why they have to put their lives on hold – is cut off by the ringing of Scott’s phone. He pulls it free from his pocket, knocking his hand against his suitcase as he does, nearly sending it off balance and to the ground.

It teeters back on all four wheels and Scott answers the call with, “Hey, Liam. Everything okay?”

“No.” Isaac can hear Liam’s voice even without the phone set to speaker. “*Mason, Parrish, and I were just attacked by a hellhound. We’re...*” There’s a wince from Liam, like he’s in pain. “*Mostly fine, but he kept talking about the Wild Hunt. And something we let out.*”

Isaac’s heart falls into his stomach. Because this isn’t an obstacle they can ignore, not if it’s all linked back to the Hunt, not if it’s a direct result of everything they did.

“Where are you?” Scott asks.

“*We’re at the school, but–*”

“Go home and heal. We’ll look for the hellhound.”

Isaac wants to protest, wants to plant his feet and dig into his stance, but he knows they don’t have any other choice. They can’t leave this box unchecked. They have to figure this out.

Isaac can only hope that they’ll put a stop to whatever this is before it gets a chance to really start.

—

They take the Jeep to the Tate household, leaving Lydia’s car in the driveway. Malia was supposed to be flying out to France tonight, but her flight’s been delayed so many times that they had to forget about the original plan of Isaac and Scott dropping her at the airport on their way out of town.

Which means, she hasn’t left Beacon Hills yet. Which means, they can still rope her into this too.

And Isaac feels distinctly bad about it. Because he knows how excited Malia was for her trip and he knows how badly she wants to get out of here, to see the world, to find some escape and some freedom from all the bad things that happened to her here.

But, if Isaac has to stay, then so does everyone else.

So, he drives and Stiles makes snarky complaints in the backseat, grumbling at Isaac to, “Be gentle!”

“I am being gentle!” Isaac calls back because he *is*. Stiles is just being a menace on purpose because he doesn’t know how to deal with the sudden upheaval of their plans and the surge in supernatural activity.

It’s strange because Stiles is usually the first to get inappropriately excited for a development like this. He’s usually ready to dive head first into the next problem, but Isaac knows the Hunt changed something in him. Something about being taken and erased and forgotten... something about it dulled Stiles’ enthusiasm, made him all the more willing and compelled by the prospect of leaving, of not having to face a threat like this again.

Isaac twists his hands around the steering wheel, heart beating too fast in his chest as the implications of what this could mean bounce around his head like an echo that will never stop, that feeds off itself and grows with every passing second.

Until, eventually, they pull up at the Tate household and Stiles and Lydia climb out to convince Malia while Isaac and Scott sit in wait.

Isaac keeps his hands around the steering wheel and his seatbelt clipped on. He has half a mind to pull out of this driveway right now and never look back.

He doesn't, of course, but most of that credit probably goes to Scott and his hand over Isaac's. He gently pulls Isaac's fingers off the wheel, loosening his tight-knuckled grip and lacing their hands together. He gives a gentle squeeze and says, "Whatever it is, we'll deal with it."

Isaac sighs, "Yeah, Scott. That's kind of the problem."

But there's no bitterness to it. It's just a statement of fact. Because Isaac knew what he was getting into with Scott. He knows full well that the savior complex is part of why he fell so hard for him. He can't fault Scott for caring, for wanting to help people, not when it's part of what makes him so special. Isaac just worries what this is going to cost them, how it's going to hurt Scott, when it's going to *stop*.

"I just," Isaac exhales again. He strokes his thumb over the back of Scott's hand, tracing over a vein there. "I'm just worried that, if we don't leave now, then we never will."

Scott looks like he doesn't know what to say to that. He simply brings Isaac's hand up to his mouth and plants a kiss to his knuckles.

Isaac supposes that will have to be enough.

—

It takes longer than Isaac expected, but, eventually, Stiles and Lydia exit the house with a grumpy Malia trailing behind them. She practically slams her seatbelt into place. Isaac has a quip about *being gentle* on his tongue, but it's cut off when she slaps her hand on the back of Scott's seat and says, "Come on, Lahey. Drive before I change my mind."

Isaac huffs a humorless laugh and does as he's told, sticking the car in reverse and peeling out of the driveway and back onto the road.

They drive mostly in silence for a while, the weight of calamity resting heavy over all of them. Isaac thinks there's nothing to say, but then Lydia speaks anyway.

“We opened a doorway into another world. And something came out with us.” Her voice is rough and gravelly, low with, “Now, we need the hellhound to stop it.”

“At least it isn’t a doorway in our minds,” Isaac says, sardonic and detached. This is so *stupid*. His life is so *stupid*.

“Isaac...” Stiles says, shaking his head with a sigh of something faintly amused but fakely disappointed.

“What?” Isaac bites back, glancing in the rearview mirror to get a look at Stiles, to make sure what he’s hearing in his voice is accurate, to make sure he isn’t secretly upset. (He’s not. If anything, Stiles looks close to laughing.)

This is all so *stupid*. It’s been radio silence for three months, but, no, on the *day* they’re supposed to leave town, mayhem returns. Isaac curses his luck and curses his fate.

Malia ignores the lighthearted bickering between them, merely stating, “So, we put it back. We’ve put things back before.”

Isaac looks at Scott, who looks at Lydia, who looks at Stiles.

“Why are you four looking at each other like there’s something you know that I don’t?” Malia asks. There’s something wounded there, something almost angry. And maybe it’s because of the Peter thing, Isaac isn’t sure.

“It might not be that simple,” Scott says, looking over his shoulder and into the backseat, but only for a moment.

“We saved Stiles,” Lydia says. Her hand falls over his. “We brought everyone back, but that’s not how it was supposed to happen.” Her voice goes flat with, “There’s always a price to pay.”

“We learned that from the nemeton,” Stiles whispers. And Isaac doesn’t like the way he sounds when he says it, doesn’t like that hopelessness to his voice.

(He’s really, really considering turning the car around right now and taking them toward the highway.)

“What kind of price?” Malia asks. She sounds a little bit more concerned now, a little more genuinely intrigued. “A big price?”

“Big,” Lydia confirms.

And Isaac has a feeling she’s thinking about her premonition, but Isaac isn’t. He’s thinking about Allison and Aiden and the forever darkness around Scott and Stiles’ hearts.

He’s thinking about the hardest battle they’ve ever fought and how he can’t bear the idea of doing it all again, even if he might not have a choice.

—

Isaac speeds into the school parking lot and skids to a screeching stop, but Stiles doesn’t complain about the safety of his precious car. Because the stakes have risen exponentially, because their priorities lie elsewhere now.

Scott is the first one out of the Jeep, sprinting to the edge of the school sign, saying, “Okay. We should move pretty quickly.”

“Do we even know *what* we let out?” Malia questions.

They don’t, but that’s the thing: “This hellhound might be the only one who does.”

Then, just as the words have left Scott’s mouth, there’s a bellowing roar in the distance. And it’s not Parrish, Isaac knows, but it does have the distinct timber of a hellhound. Except, peculiarly, the sound is almost *pained*.

Isaac looks at Scott to see if he’s noticed, but their eyes don’t have a chance to meet because Scott is already running off without another second’s pause.

They race out of the parking lot and into the woods lining the edge of the school. They kick up the underbrush as they duck under branches and snake around tree trunks, following only the ricocheting roars of the hellhound and the faint scent of blood.

They run as fast as they can, chasing after their only lead, their only hope at putting a stop to all of this *before* it escalates beyond containable proportions.

But... they’re too late.

Isaac hears a gunshot and then they’re dipping around a web of trees

and into a clearing. And then the body comes into view.

The hellhound has bloody scratches across his chest and a bullet hole between his eyes. There's no heartbeat under the surface, no signs of breath or life.

"I thought you couldn't kill a hellhound," Lydia says. And that's the final stamp of approval, the final note of certainty. The mark of a banshee and the confirmation that this hellhound is *dead*.

Their one hope is gone.

Scott leans down into a crouch, fingers grazing the dirt as he picks up a small, cylindrical item, out of place in the nature of the forest. He stands with it held between two fingers, the glinting metal embossed with a fleur-de-lis. Scott breathes the realization, the recognition of, "*Argent*."

Isaac clears his throat and tries to swallow, but his lungs are full of sand. He feels like he can't breathe because he knows there's no escaping this now, not without bloodshed, at least. And that knowledge is like a noose around his heart, like a freezer around his bones.

"Then it's true," Lydia whispers.

"Then what's true?"

Lydia doesn't say anything right away. She's staring at the body of the hellhound, almost enchanted by the death of him.

"What else did you hear?" Stiles presses.

"The sound of people who've never lifted a hand against another human being."

"Something was killing them?" Scott guesses.

Lydia takes a step towards the body of the hellhound and utters five words of stone cold dread.

"They were killing each other."

Raw Talent

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 12

Word count: 8,361

“We can still catch them,” says Malia.

Isaac’s only half listening to her. A good portion of his attention is going to Scott, to the subtle uptick of his heart and quickening pace of his path. There’s a quiet confusion in him, something scared in the brown of his eyes.

“Catch who?” Scott asks, like he’s waking up from a dream, like he’s resurfacing into the present.

“The killer,” Malia says slowly. Then, eyebrows furrowed, “What are you thinking about?”

Scott holds up the metal casing, saying, “Getting the bullet to Argent.”

His heart rate doesn’t reveal a lie, but Isaac knows it’s more than that. He knows there’s something else going on, some other direction Scott’s mind has gone in – something unfavorable and haunting.

“Even if he’s the one that fired it?” Stiles questions, stepping over a winding root to get closer to Scott.

“Especially if he’s the one.”

Scott turns on his heel, like he’s going to take off into the distance again, but he stops before his foot can leave the ground. He freezes in place, back going rigid and shoulders squaring out.

“Do you hear that?” he whispers.

Isaac dips into super-hearing, allowing himself to open up to the forest around him, to take in the thumping sound of, “Heartbeats.”

“A lot of them,” Malia confirms, listening now too.

“They’re here,” Scott says, as if that means something, as if they

should know who *they* are.

“Who?” Lydia asks.

“Hunters,” Scott says. Then, “Run.”

And Isaac doesn’t wait around to see if he can get a glimpse of the enemy, he just follows Scott’s lead. Scott starts running and Isaac does too.

Stiles is calling from behind them, but Scott doesn’t slow down, so neither does Isaac. He’s running like he’s being chased, he’s running like his life depends on it. He’s running with a heart racing in his chest and a head thrown over his shoulder every few seconds, looking for something Isaac can’t make sense of.

There are other heartbeats in the woods, but there aren’t footsteps and there aren’t shadows behind them. There’s nothing to run from, but still Scott does it anyway.

Scott loses most of the group easily, sprinting faster than Isaac thinks he’s ever seen him go before. Isaac runs after him, but Scott pulls distance between them, motivated in ways that Isaac isn’t.

Scott disappears through a web of trees and Isaac’s heart leaps into his throat. He buckles down and powers up, increasing his speed impossibly so, breaking through a clearing to see...

Scott just standing there. He’s surrounded by deputies and the bright white of shining flashlights.

Scott’s eyes are glowing red and, somehow, by some link of connection, Isaac knows what’s about to happen. He knows Scott is about to attack, knows he’s seeing something *wrong*.

And so, Isaac doesn’t stop running. He runs right at Scott, gets his hands on his shoulders and his golden eyes locked with red, and he shouts, “*Scott!*”

In an instant, Scott’s eyes fade back to brown. Isaac lets his own dull to blue and they stand there just staring at each other for a moment. Scott’s heart is hammering in his chest, going faster than Isaac’s, like it has a point to prove. And he’s trembling faintly under the hold of Isaac’s hands, a quiet quivering of his shoulders and chest.

Then, Scott tears his eyes away, flicking quick and desperate over the

expanse of the clearing, taking in the deputies around them and the almost-attacked silhouette of the sheriff. His eyes go wide and confused and he almost looks like he's going to cry.

"I'm sorry," Scott blurts.

Stilinski gives a hasty shake of his head, one that means, *it's okay*. Then, to the deputies, he says, "Everybody stay back. It's just some kids."

The flashlights don't go away all at once. Isaac knows there's at least six guns pointed in their direction now, but he doesn't waver and he doesn't let it scare him. He keeps his chemosignals and his energy as calm as he can manage, trying to push that serenity into Scott through his shoulders, rubbing gently at the tension there.

One of the deputies speaks into the silence, "What's wrong with their eyes?"

Isaac's heart catches in his chest, just a brief moment of fear, but, fortunately, Stilinski isn't their only ally in the clearing. Parrish steps between the deputy and Isaac and Scott, saying, "You heard the sheriff. Stand down."

The deputy's flashlight lowers and the rest go with it.

Isaac feels himself exhale in relief, feels it rushing through his lungs and into the night air. He drops one of his hands from Scott's shoulder, but keeps the other in place, masks it as a more casual touch, a more average show of affection. But, really, the touch is grounding and stabilizing.

Finally, the other three – Stiles, Malia, and Lydia – run into the clearing. They come in panting for breath and staring at Scott in thinly veiled alarm. Scott meets their eyes with something that reeks of *shame*.

—

They lead Stilinski and Parrish back through the woods to the body of the hellhound. Most of the other deputies have dispersed now, fanning out to search the surrounding woods. But, even still, Isaac keeps a close eye on Scott and they keep their voices hushed.

"I'm really sorry," Scott says again. Isaac knows he's apologizing for almost attacking the sheriff, but he shouldn't have to. He didn't

actually do anything and nobody actually got hurt – well, other than the still dead hellhound before them.

“You don’t think they saw anything, do you?” Scott asks.

They know full well that at least one of the deputies saw their glowing eyes, but, as Parrish says, it’s, “No more than they’re used to.”

“You wanna tell me what happened here?” Sheriff Stilinski questions. He’s keeping his voice level and gentle, like maybe he’s worried about spooking Scott again.

“He’s a hellhound,” Parrish says, pointing to the body.

“A *dead* hellhound,” Stiles adds, though it’s entirely unnecessary.

Isaac spares the time to meet Stiles with an unimpressed and exasperated stare, but he doesn’t look at him long enough to catch his reaction. Isaac can’t bear to have Scott out of his sight, not when there’s so much confusion clouding his mind, not when he doesn’t understand what just happened.

“Yep, got that,” Stilinski says, rolling his eyes at his son.

“Well, I *don’t* get it. I didn’t think you *could* kill a hellhound,” Parrish says. And, while none of them actually knew this man, Isaac knows this is personal for Parrish. He’s being confronted with his own mortality, with his own potential fragility.

Parrish looks at Isaac when he says it, but it’s Malia that answers with a blunt sort of, “Looks a lot easier than we thought.”

That earns her an exasperated look too, this time from Lydia instead of Isaac.

Scott’s staring at the ground with an unwarranted intensity. He’s avoiding eye contact and avoiding conversation. The issue is: he’s not being at all subtle about it.

And so, Stilinski leans down to try to meet Scott’s eye, asking, “Got anything you want to add?”

Isaac’s pretty sure Stilinski would let them go without another word if Scott denied him, even if he wouldn’t believe the refusal. They all know there’s something more here, but Isaac’s pretty sure Stilinski has passed the point of expecting his authority to prevail.

“Yeah,” Scott says. But Isaac sees his hand drop into his pocket, hears the quiet fall of the bullet casing meeting the bottom. “I don’t think it was just any bullet.”

Parrish kneels down at the side of the body, whispers, “I hope not.”

And Isaac thinks: *magic bullet*.

The drive back to the McCall house passes in stilted silence. Isaac almost thinks the talk is going to be avoided altogether, but then, as the Jeep grumbles to a stop and Isaac sets it into park, Lydia asks, “Why didn’t you say anything?”

She does nothing to indicate that the question is directed towards Scott, but they all know it is.

Scott twists around in his seat, looking back mostly at Lydia, but at Stiles and Malia too. He doesn’t answer the question, merely redirects it with, “Why didn’t *you* say anything?”

Lydia slumps back in her seat, like she doesn’t really have an answer for that.

Stiles frowns, “Why didn’t *any* of you say anything?” Then, brows furrowed and voice lightly animated, “Wait. Was I supposed to say something?”

It probably makes the most sense for Stiles to have said something since, you know, son of the sheriff, but, as Scott says, “None of us said anything because of Argent and none of us are going to say anything until we talk to him. Everybody good with that?”

Isaac looks around at the rest of the group, sees no signs of protest, sees general acceptance working its way through the car.

“As long as we talk to Argent soon,” Lydia says. “*Immediately*, would be preferable.”

“Premonition?” Malia guesses.

“Yeah,” Lydia says, impatient and exasperated, like she’s fed up with all of this – Isaac wouldn’t blame her. “The one with the screaming and people killing each other?”

Scott gives Lydia a short nod, but turns back around in his seat and,

facing through the window, says, “First, we find Argent.”

Then, he climbs out of the Jeep.

Lydia’s headlights shine bright in the drive, then gradually ebb and dim and disappear as she, Stiles, and Malia head home for the evening. Isaac is expecting Scott to close the door of the Jeep and go inside his house, but, instead, he gets right back into the passenger side.

He closes the door behind him and, for a moment, Scott and Isaac just sit in silence. Isaac knows Scott is avoiding the conversation, avoiding the interrogation, but he also knows that Scott got back in the car. And that means he’s at least somewhat open to questions. Or, at least, he’s open to *Isaac’s* questions.

“What happened back there?” Isaac asks.

He doesn’t take his seatbelt off and he doesn’t make any moves towards dragging this out, but he does shift his body to look at Scott, to look at his profile and the apprehension in his posture.

Scott looks at him, tipping his head as he leans back against the seat. He gets this unexpectedly fond smile and says, “Your voice brought me back. Your voice... anchored me.”

And it’s not a proper answer to the question – they’re both fully aware of that – but it’s so achingly sweet that Isaac can’t help but go lax under it. He loses his fight for clarity and lets a smile spread across his features, slow and enamored.

“Yeah,” he says. “I guess it did.”

Scott leans over the console to press a brief kiss to Isaac’s lips. He murmurs against him, “Text me when you get back to the loft?”

And then, without waiting for agreement, he ducks out of the car and leaves Isaac feeling a little speechless and a lot warm.

Isaac slides open the door of the loft and is almost immediately slammed back against it. He winces as the metal handle collides with his lower spine, digging in as Derek pins him with a forearm across his

throat and a hand around his bicep.

“Derek,” Isaac whispers, voice weakened by the pressure to his windpipe.

Derek’s eyes widen as the realization hits. He quickly pulls back and away, freeing Isaac from the attack, frantic fingers running through his hair as he stumbles back with shuddering breaths. “Jesus, Isaac. You scared the hell out of me. What are you doing here?”

Isaac deflates a little, goes sheepish with it. Because he knows how Derek is going to react, but he also knows that he doesn’t have any other choice.

“We can’t leave yet,” Isaac says. “There’s something happening. A hellhound attacked Liam, said we let something out of the Wild Hunt. But then, before we could find out what that *thing* is, the *hellhound* was killed, which everyone thought was impossible, but... yeah. And – And Lydia had this premonition of people killing each–”

“Isaac, you’re not making any sense,” Derek says, shaking his head. Then, “Whatever’s happening, *I’ll* deal with it, okay?”

“No,” Isaac says. His voice is taut with emotion. “No, no. It all has to do with what we did to bring Stiles back. Derek, it’s – we have to clean up our mess.”

“There’s always going to be another one, Isaac. You know that.”

Isaac sighs and ducks his head, avoiding eye contact like that will save him from the weight of Derek’s words. The emotional labor of the day is really catching up to him now. He can feel his resolve cracking as his energy wears thin. He doesn’t have anything else to give right now. He doesn’t know what to do, he can barely think straight with it all.

“Can we – Can we talk about this tomorrow? You can lecture me then, I’m just,” Isaac swallows, clears his throat, looks up. “I’m tired.”

“Yeah, Isaac, of course,” Derek says, softening as soon as he sees the way Isaac is splintering. And, “I’m not gonna *lecture* you though. That makes me sound so old and mean.”

“You are old and mean,” Isaac mumbles. Then, not letting Derek protest, “Good night.”

Isaac hears Derek's scoffing laughter and a soft call of, "good night," but he's already halfway up the stairs.

Isaac crawls into bed, delaying it only long enough to scramble out of his jeans and shirt. He curls up without a pillow – it's packed up in the Jeep and he doesn't even care – and texts Scott a: **Got home safe. Except for Derek trying to kill me. Oops. Good night.**

And then, he promptly passes out without another thought.

—

The next morning, Derek makes Isaac after-nightmare tea. It's not necessary, there were no bad dreams, but he must realize how much Isaac needs *something* of a pick me up. So, he makes it and Isaac drinks it happily.

Derek doesn't start talking until his mug is empty and there's a plate of eggs and sausage in front of Isaac. Only then does he say, "If you really want to stay behind and clean up this mess, fine. *But* you have to do two things for me."

Isaac hums around a forkful of egg.

"One: you need to go through the proper process of deferring admission. Not because I want you to leave, but because you *want* to go," Derek says. "And two: you need to let me help."

Isaac can't find any faults in the asks.

"Okay?" Derek questions.

"Okay," Isaac agrees. Because he can't see any harm in it. He wouldn't want to keep Derek out of the loop even if he could, and deferring admission doesn't sound like a bad idea. It gives them space to breathe, to figure this out, but it doesn't give them any excuse to linger in Beacon Hills longer than is absolutely necessary. It's a compromise of sorts.

"So, you gonna tell me what happened?"

Isaac does. Over a plate of eggs and sausages, he explains the snippets shared from Lydia's premonition, the presence of the hellhound, and the *something* they let out of the Wild Hunt.

Isaac doesn't mention the fleur-de-lis casing, knows it's a justifiably

sore spot for Derek and he doesn't want to make an unnecessary fuss about it. But, he does ask, "Do you know where Argent disappeared to?"

"No," Derek says. He takes a sip of his coffee. "I don't think I've seen him since we first brought everyone back from the Hunt." Then, "Why?"

Isaac shrugs. "We think he might be able to help us figure out what kind of bullet killed the hellhound."

And it's not entirely a lie. It's enough of the truth that Isaac's heart doesn't skip. And he doesn't feel guilty for the omission of full details. He knows he's protecting Derek's feelings and he refuses to risk them until he knows for certain Argent's involvement.

Derek nods. "What's the game plan?"

"Uh," Isaac turns his empty mug on the table. "Scott and I are going to look for Argent, Stiles and Lydia are going to talk to Parrish about Lydia's premonition, and Malia's going out into the woods to investigate the dead wolves. She could probably use your help. She's just trying to find *something* to help us figure out what we even unleashed."

Derek agrees with the plan and the assignment and they eat the rest of their breakfast in a comfortable silence.

—

Isaac shows up at the McCall house a couple hours later, waiting outside for Scott to join him in the Jeep.

He comes in with a quiet, "Hey, babe. Sleep okay?"

Isaac barely resists the urge to slam his face into the horn of the steering wheel, instead says, "I fell asleep *minutes* after I texted. You?"

Scott shrugs, and Isaac knows that probably means, *no*. But he doesn't question it now, simply holds Scott's hand and drives with the other, heading in the direction of the Argent bunker and the underground tunnels.

"So, I talked to Derek," Isaac says, as casually as he can manage. "He said he would *let me* stay as long as he's allowed to help and..." Isaac drags it out a little, for some reason feeling hesitant to add, "if I go

through the proper channels to defer admission to UC Davis.”

“Oh,” Scott says. He squeezes Isaac’s hand, but it’s an absentminded thing, just a simple touch. “That’s a good idea. I’m sure my mom would like it if I did that too.”

“Yeah?” Isaac asks, eyes darting away from the road just long enough to get a glimpse of Scott.

He nods. “Yeah.”

There’s something shallow in the statement, something not quite genuine and not quite flush with Scott’s usual enthusiasm.

“What’re you thinking?” Isaac asks. He doesn’t press hard, just gives a gentle nudge towards vulnerability, towards open communication and shared thoughts. He doesn’t want to push, but he has to just a little.

Scott plays with Isaac’s fingers now, fiddling with them as some sort of distraction as he says, “I don’t know. I’m just not convinced that we’re ever going to be able to leave. Like, there’s always going to be another problem or there’s always going to be somebody that wants us dead. And I just – I don’t know if I can leave knowing that. It feels like I’d be doing something *wrong* if I did.”

Isaac makes a soft noise of sympathy. And, “Scott. You’ve been doing the right thing, all the time, for two and half years. I think you’re due some moments of wrong.”

(In truth: Isaac’s certain that Scott taking something for himself wouldn’t be wrong in the slightest. In truth: Isaac’s certain that Scott being selfish just one time wouldn’t set the world on fire. But he also knows that Scott isn’t going to believe him if he says that, so he puts the sentiment together a little differently, frames it in a light that Scott might actually be able to look into.)

Scott sighs. “It sounds easy when you put it like that, but... we caused this. This is our mess and we have to clean up.”

“Okay,” Isaac says because he’s already lost all hope of leaving before the current issue is resolved. “So, we clean up whatever we let out of the Hunt. But after that?”

Scott hums. “After that what?”

“After that, would you consider living for yourself?” Isaac says. “You

know, just give it a shot, see how it goes?”

He doesn't tack on a, *for me*, but he's certain Scott can hear it anyway.

Scott squeezes Isaac's hand, more intentionally this time, and says, “I guess it wouldn't hurt to try.”

Isaac smiles and resists the desire to crash the car and kiss him on the mouth. “That's all I can ask for.”

—

Argent isn't answering their calls or texts. He's not home and he's not in the bunker. It's becoming increasingly obvious that Argent doesn't want to be found. And yet, they're going to keep looking anyway. They're going to drag him into the next supernatural fiasco.

Because the last time a stamped bullet showed up, Derek almost died. Or he technically did die and then he came back to life. He *evolved*, or whatever.

“Could we track him by scent?” Isaac suggests, watching as Scott pours a bunch of bullets onto the metal of the table. It brings with it a clatter of sound and a reminder of that day in the animal clinic, when Lydia's powers told them that Derek wasn't dead or alive – the aged down Derek that she could sense, but couldn't quite *make* sense of.

Scott shrugs, “We *could*, but it'd probably take too long. I was thinking we crack the password on his laptop. Y'know, since his calendar is on there.”

Isaac gapes, just a little. But he's quick to school his expression into a smirk, “Who are you and what have you done with my boyfriend?”

Scott makes a soft grumbling noise, releasing a quiet exhale of, “Shut up.”

Isaac smiles at him, fond from all angles, and slides onto a stool and opens the laptop. The screen's background is full of a fancy logo, reading: **Argent Arms International**. It's covered only partially by a box for a password and a blinking cursor.

Isaac types the first thing that comes to mind: **Silver**.

Expectedly, it doesn't work, but they have to get the obvious guesses

out of the way first, right?

The word *hunter* springs to mind, but Isaac's pretty sure that has less to do with Argent and more to do with Scott.

Isaac abandons the laptop for a moment, waiting for a strike of genius, and swivels in the stool. He watches as Scott leans over a large crate, fiddling with the lock swinging in its latch.

"Scott," Isaac says quietly. It's almost a question, but doesn't quite meet the mark.

"Yeah?" Scott asks, looking over his shoulder, letting their eyes slide together.

"Are you gonna talk to me about what happened in the woods last night? Or are we just going to ignore it forever?"

"Ignore it forever," Scott answers without a moment's pause.

Isaac huffs a breath of laughter, only faintly amused. Again, he says, "Scott."

"Nothing happened," Scott says. It's far too quick and far too obviously a lie. Isaac doesn't need the mess of chemosignals or the messy beat of Scott's heart to tell him that. He knows Scott too well now, knows every hitch of his breath and every shade of his eyes.

"*Something* happened," Isaac says. "You were scared."

"Yeah, okay," Scott gives, almost like he's a little annoyed by the whole ordeal. (Isaac doesn't take it personally. It's kind of ironic. Isaac puts up this front of being an emotional wall, but Scott is even worse than him. His vulnerability is always calculated and directed more towards helping others than himself. He doesn't know how to *take*, doesn't know how to do anything but *give*.) "I freaked out, okay? Is that what you want to hear? I thought I saw hunters, which doesn't make any sense because Argent isn't even a hunter anymore and we haven't heard anything from the Calaveras since Kate and—"

"Scott," Isaac says for a third time. He moves to stand, but he doesn't approach. He keeps the space between them, lets Scott decide what to do with it. "It's *okay* to freak out."

Scott honest to god pouts at him.

“We all have our demons,” Isaac says. “We just can’t face them alone.”

There’s a weight to the words that Scott doesn’t understand, but that he senses anyway. He seems to deflate under them, seems to go slack. He takes a step towards Isaac and closes a hand around his wrist, a gentle touch, a silent, *thank you*.

Because sometimes Scott just needs a reminder that Isaac is *here*. He’s not going anywhere, he’s not going to run if Scott isn’t perfect, if he doesn’t have a handle on things at all times.

Sometimes, Scott needs a reminder that Isaac is in love with *him*, not the leader of the pack and not the soldier. He’s in love with the goofy boy underneath and the blaze of his smile and the tenderness of his heart.

A reminder...

Isaac spins around faster than Scott can keep up with, pulling his wrist free from his hold. He types without thinking: **Allison**.

Scott’s breath catches and the computer unlocks.

—

Scott is drawn back to the wooden crate. He tugs at the metal of the lock, snapping it with ease.

“Uh, Isaac,” he says. “I don’t think Argent took off from Beacon Hills.” Isaac tears his eyes away from the computer screen, long enough to get a look at the selection of guns inside. “I think he’s back in business.”

Isaac returns his gaze to the calendar in front of him and says, “Well, that would explain why he has a gun deal scheduled with the U.S. Army in half an hour.”

Scott steps up next to Isaac, peering over his shoulder to get his own look at the screen. “That location is on the very edge of town. We’re gonna have to hurry if we want to get there in time.”

“We’re going to *crash* a *gun* deal?” Isaac asks, voice coming out indignant and surprised.

Scott shrugs. “What other choice do we have?”

Isaac sighs. He can think of plenty. They could go back to Scott's house and watch a movie, they could leave Beacon Hills and make it just in time for freshman orientation, they could wait until *after* the deal to ambush Argent.

But, no. Crashing a gun deal it is.

This time, it's Scott driving the Jeep while Isaac sits in the passenger seat, firing a text off to the rest of the group, informing them of what they found and where they're going.

"Hey," Scott says, as the miles stretch behind them. "Thanks for what you said back there." And, "Sorry you have to put up with my savior complex."

Isaac gives a weak laugh, but he knows Scott is being genuine, really thinks it's some chore to love him. (And some pair they make, huh?) "Don't *apologize*, Scott. I'm just doing for you what you would do for me. And, besides, I like the savior complex. Makes me feel like I'm dating a superhero, or some shit."

Scott giggles, like a real actual giggle. He looks so pleased with himself, if only for a moment. "Does that make you Lois Lane?"

Isaac scoffs. "I said *superhero*, not Superman. And, anyways, I've got just as many superpowers as you do, asshole."

Scott shakes his head. "No. No, I'm a *true alpha*. I'm special."

"Oh," Isaac says. "Oh, I see. So, you don't think I'm special?"

"Didn't say that," Scott counters. "I think you're special. Doesn't mean you actually are though. I'm kind of biased, if you hadn't noticed."

"Scott, shut up before I jump out of this car. I hate you," Isaac rambles, crossing his arms over his chest with very little heat behind his words.

"No, you don't," Scott says, easily and too smug for his own good.

Isaac sighs. "No. Unfortunately not."

Scott laughs, like a full belly proper laugh. Isaac lights up with a smile at the sound of it, at the way his heart melts to honey in his chest and flowers bloom in his eyes at the beauty of it all.

They pull up around the corner from an abandoned parking garage structure. They can't get any closer without alerting Argent and the military of their arrival, so they take the remaining distance on foot, creeping past two black SUVs and behind stone columns.

"If you knew anything about guns, you'd know they aren't loaded."

Mr. Argent's voice carries through the structure, echoing faintly in the cavernous space and reaching Isaac and Scott's ears. They flash a nervous look and pick up the pace only slightly, accompanied by the metallic sound of guns being loaded.

"We brought our own," a foreign voice speaks.

Isaac and Scott duck behind the nearest and last column, the last obstruction standing between them and the gun deal.

"And I always have a backup plan."

Isaac and Scott don't wait to find out what that means. They enact their own plan.

Isaac takes out the nearest of the uniformed men, grabbing him by the collar and knocking a swift punch across the face. The guy drops towards the ground, seemingly unconscious, but Isaac stays close in case he tries to get back up, planting a foot in the center of his chest.

"What the hell are you guys doing here?" Argent asks, taking stock of Scott and Isaac and the passed out military personnel.

"We're your backup," Scott says quickly, unbothered and unfazed.

Argent rolls his eyes, denies the claim with, "I had a guy on the inside."

"Who?" Isaac asks. Because, by the looks of it, all of the men still have guns pointed at them, none making any moves to help them.

Argent lowers his eyebrows and gives an unimpressed, "You're *standing* on him."

Isaac pulls his foot away and feels his mouth drop open in a shocked and apologetic sort of expression. He shares a shrugging look with Scott, like clearly he didn't know that and didn't mean to do that.

Argent gives a miserable sort of forced smile. And then, without ceremony or warning, he's yelling, "Get down!"

The exterior lights of the parking garage fade into darkness and gunfire starts up at once. Isaac has the cover of a stone column close by and accessible, but he doesn't sprint directly behind it. He acts purely on instinct, hesitating long enough to grab the guy on the inside, tugging his unconscious form out of the line of fire.

In the end, the delay gets Isaac shot. The bullet collides where chest meets shoulder and Isaac hisses a groan at the initial impact, the initial burst of blood. It slows him down a moment longer, but then he's successfully slipping behind the column and out of sight.

He props the guy on the inside up against the stone and reaches a reactionary hand towards his wound. It's an ordinary bullet, Isaac knows. He can feel the tissue try to heal around it, but the wound won't close until the bullet is dislodged. He considers trying to get it out himself, but figures that might do more harm than good and, ultimately, decides to leave it alone for now.

Waves of pungent concern radiate outwards and reach Isaac's nose with a tickle of scent.

Isaac looks past the breeze of bullets, across the way to where Scott is hidden behind a wooden crate. He's staring at Isaac, like he's only two seconds away from breaking out of his hiding spot just to run to him.

Isaac gives a sharp shake of his head, mouths, "*I'm fine.*"

He's still clutching over the wound, still applying pressure while he can, but it doesn't really hurt. It's nothing he hasn't experienced before and nothing that can't be fixed once they're out of this nightmare attempt at a rescue mission.

The bullets clatter to the ground as gunfire continues raining over the space. Isaac looks beyond Scott towards Argent on his other side, sees him with two guns in his hands and an action plan behind his eyes.

Argent gives him a brief nod and Isaac returns it, passing the motion onto Scott. His eyes are still flitting back and forth between Isaac's eyes and the blood staining his shirt, but he gets the message and complies.

In one fell swoop, Argent emerges with two guns blazing while Isaac and Scott circle around the group to attack from behind. Scott takes

one side and Isaac takes the other, slamming a kick into the back of one of the gunmen's legs, causing his knee to buckle and sending his weapon crashing to the ground. (Isaac kicks that too, sending it far enough out of reach.)

Isaac takes out one of the gunmen and Scott takes out the other, but the third and final stands there still. He's holding a gun directly at Isaac. Isaac doesn't wince or react in any way, just stares down the barrel, calculating the distance and his ability to escape the rapid fire of a machine gun.

His odds aren't great, considering the bullet hole in his shoulder and the subtle pain inhibiting his movements.

Scott's edging closer, preparing to make any moves necessary to save Isaac, but, turns out, he doesn't have to.

Argent's gun cocks and comes to rest at the back of the fake-military man's head. He doesn't wait around, just gets right back to business with, "Who are the guns for?"

The man drops his gun to the ground, but Isaac can see his face. He can see that he doesn't seem scared and he doesn't seem cornered. Isaac catches a flicker of movement as he reaches into his pocket. And then, before a warning can leave his lips, a grenade drops to the ground.

Isaac stumbles back without thinking, watching as Scott, like a complete idiot, decides that trying to cross the entire parking garage to get to him is a good idea, rather than just ducking for cover right where he stands.

Fortunately for both of them – because Isaac would kill Scott if he got himself murdered in such a stupid way – Scott has werewolf speed to use to his advantage. He crosses the space before the explosion goes off, grabbing Isaac and bodily hurtling them both to the ground. He's covering Isaac's body with his, using his own back and shoulders as a shield as smoke fills the air and wraps them in a tight embrace.

—

And, when the smoke settles and the air clears, the man is gone. When the ringing in Isaac's ears starts to fade, tires screech across the ground as the opposition make their escape.

Isaac presses slowly from the ground, begrudgingly accepting Scott's

assistance in the movement. (He doesn't really need it, but he knows it's helping Scott keep a cool head, so he suffers the kindness in silence.)

"For the record," Argent says, watching them with a slight ripple of worry in his brows. "I had everything under control." And, "How did you find me?"

"You left your computer in the bunker," Scott says, but he's not looking at Argent. He has gentle hands on Isaac's right shoulder now, assessing the damage of the bullet.

"Ah," Argent intones his recognition, breathes a mostly unheard, "I guess I need a new password."

"Scott," Isaac says, resisting the urge to shake him off, if only because he knows the movement will make him wince and that will make Scott's worry worse. He tries to remember that if the positions were flipped, he would probably be just as annoying. "You can let go of me, y'know? I was shot in the shoulder, not the leg."

"You were *shot*," Scott repeats, like that's all the excuse he needs to be cradling him so gently. And maybe it is, Isaac doesn't know.

"I'm pretty sure I'm gonna live," Isaac mumbles, trying to bring some levity to the space.

"You got shot," Scott repeats. It's like it's the only thought in his mind, like he can't see past the blood and the soft tendrils of pain.

"I'll heal," Isaac says. It's supposed to be reassuring, but it comes out a little more irritated instead.

Scott shakes his head, bringing one of his hands up to cup Isaac's jaw, thumb caressing the skin there. And that's Isaac's limit, if he's honest, but he doesn't pull away yet anyway.

"I'm calling my mom and you're going to the hospital."

"Scott—"

"I'm calling my mom and you're going to the hospital," he repeats, leaving no room for protest and interruption.

Isaac tips his head back and sighs.

"I haven't been avoiding you," Argent says, which sounds a little bit like a lie. Isaac's long since learned not to expect the answers from Argent's heartbeat though. It's almost always steady, even when the worst is happening. "I've been busy. Business is booming and I'd like to know why."

"Have you made any unusual sales recently?" Scott asks. He seems a little calmer now that his mom has been called, now that she's waiting for them at the hospital. (Isaac kind of wants to roll his eyes at the whole ordeal, but he does actually need to get the bullet out of his shoulder, so he keeps his exasperation to himself.)

Argent tilts his head, mouth parted open in soft confusion.

Gently but a little impatient, Isaac prompts, "Like a bullet with a fleur-de-lis?"

Isaac sees the immediate sadness in Argent's eyes, the grief that fills the space between them. He looks at Scott when he answers, "I haven't stamped a bullet since Allison died."

"Someone just killed a *hellhound* with one," Scott says. It's not disbelief in his tone, Isaac knows. They all trust Argent, maybe even more than they should. But they also know that he's the type to withhold information when he thinks it will protect them, he's the type to try to do it all on his own first. (And maybe he's more like Scott than Isaac had ever realized.)

"Can I see the casing?" Argent asks.

Scott quickly rummages through his pocket, but comes up empty handed. He looks over his shoulder, at the space under the awning of the parking garage, at the ground covered with hundreds of bullet casings.

Scott gives a slow shake of his head and a disappointed and slightly embarrassed, "It must have fallen out."

Argent releases a soft, wry, almost fond laugh. "You don't need the casing," he says. "You need the *slug*." He nods, "Find that, and you'll find your killer."

There's only one place that would be. Back in the woods of Beacon Hills.

Scott once again drives as they descend into the heart of Beacon Hills. At one point, he sneakily tries to hold Isaac's hand across the console, just so he can take some of his pain away.

"Scott," Isaac scolds, pulling free of the grip. "You're *driving*. That *can't* be safe."

Scott looks like he's tempted with laughter, but his chemosignals refuse to calm down. He's on edge and way more nervous than is at all necessary. (And Isaac is trying very hard to be understanding, to put himself in Scott's shoes, but Isaac is *fine*. He's going to heal as soon as the bullet is removed. He'll be back to normal within an hour, so these theatrics? Completely unnecessary.)

"You're getting blood on the seat," Scott says. It's not what he's really thinking and it's not what he's really worried about, but it diffuses some of the tension anyway, brings a soft smile to Isaac's lips.

"Right because this is the *first* time anyone's ever bled out in the Jeep," Isaac says. He looks at the spot above Scott's head, where Theo's blood used to be splattered across the ceiling. (Isaac refused to accept the Jeep unless Stiles did something about that, so now there's a patchy layer of paint covering it. Because, apparently, he couldn't get it off with cleaning products.)

"You're not bleeding out though," Scott says. Then, "Right?"

"*Scott*," Isaac complains, but he's laughing just a little. Because, truth be told, it's sort of sweet – how much Scott cares, how worried he is about something so minor.

Scott laughs too, just because he thinks Isaac's amusement is contagious. Or, at least, that's what Isaac's been told in the past – when Isaac made himself laugh hard enough his stomach hurt and Scott laughed along too, but confessed it was only because of Isaac's joy and not because he thought the joke was actually funny.

They pull into the hospital parking lot, saving Scott from having to make any sort of defense for himself and his truly comical levels of concern.

Isaac unbuckles his seatbelt and Scott moves to do the same, but Isaac quickly cuts him off, says, "No. I'm fine here. You should go meet with Argent, Malia, and..."

Isaac trails off. The final name in his list dies on his lips as he sees the

man standing in front of the hospital, looking only entirely out of place with his arms crossed over his chest and a frown across his features.

Isaac rounds on Scott, “You called *Derek*?”

Scott, at least, has the decency to look cowed. He gives a soft shrug and an interesting mix between a grimace and a grin.

“You’re the worst,” Isaac says. But he’s only pretending to be annoyed. Because, really, his heart is doing funny things in his chest, thinking about how looked after he feels. It’s not just Scott that’s trying to take care of him. It’s also Derek showing up at the hospital, the concerned wrinkle in Argent’s brows before they left, and the wrought tone of Melissa’s voice on the phone.

Isaac feels... *loved*.

He buries his facade of indifference, if only for a moment, for long enough to plant a delicate kiss to the corner of Scott’s mouth. Then, he exits the Jeep and joins Derek on the pavement, allowing him a moment to rove his eyes over Isaac’s shoulder, over the blood that’s painted there. And, all the while, Isaac hides his protests in a tight-lipped sort of smile.

—

Derek leads Isaac down to the morgue where Melissa is waiting, making the pointed decision to take the stairs instead of the elevator. It’s not really necessary, but given the state of Isaac, it’s probably a good idea and definitely a nice gesture.

“I can’t believe you got shot,” Derek mumbles. “Next time there’s any sort of mission, *you’re* going to be sitting out.”

Isaac rolls his eyes. “Give it a rest. You were shot *five* times by *wolfsbane* bullets. I was shot *once* with a regular bullet.”

Derek looks like he wants to cuff Isaac on the back of the head, but then they’re breaking out of the stairwell and into the hallway, quickly crossing the space to slink through the double doors of the morgue.

As promised, Melissa is waiting for them with a metal table in the middle of the room and a tray full of medical equipment that look distinctly like torture devices.

Isaac slips his sweater and shirt off, wincing only when the slightly drying blood sticks and pulls, climbing on the table without a greeting or a word.

Derek stands on the uninjured side of Isaac with Melissa on the other. She places a gloved hand on the edge of Isaac's arm, low down beyond the bullet's reach, but still gentle and near-tentative.

"This is gonna hurt," Melissa says.

Isaac doesn't know how to explain that pain is like a second skin. He doesn't know how to put into words how desensitized he is to the ache, how this feels like such a common occurrence, how his heart rate doesn't waver or rise in his chest. He doesn't know how to explain that pain feels like a default setting for Isaac. It's like somewhere between thrown glasses and freezers and werewolf claws, the wires crossed and now Isaac doesn't flinch when he should anymore, flinches only at things that shouldn't cause any reaction at all.

He can't say any of that, so he just says, "Okay."

And then, Melissa is picking up one of the intimidating tools and getting to work. Isaac can feel the cool touch of the metal, but, as soon as the pain of the extraction starts, there's a second tug.

Derek's hand slots into Isaac's and he takes the pain in big mouthfuls of black lines and sour scent. He takes and Isaac lets him because he would do the same if the positions were switched. In fact, Isaac *has* done the same before, and he won't deny Derek this feeling of helping.

Isaac just lies there without a twitch as Melissa pulls the bullet free from his shoulder. It goes by quick and mostly painless. He feels only the cool metal of the torture device and the warmy fuzzy feeling in his hand, the feeling of his pain being taken and absorbed.

And, in a matter of minutes, the bullet is out and his skin is knitting back together.

"See how easy that was?" Isaac says, just a touch too smug. Throwing his shirt back on and looking at Melissa, he says, "Your son is so dramatic."

Melissa gives him a small smile, and, "He just cares about you."

Isaac deflates and softens at once. Because, yeah, Scott really does

care about him.

Isaac has to practically beg Derek to take him back to the McCall house. It's making him a little angry, but in that way of protective older siblings and a family that cares. It's irritating, but kind of sweet.

"The sooner we go, the sooner we can find out what's going on, and the sooner you can take me home," Isaac states, like some sort of bargain or attempt at persuasion.

It works well enough because Derek just huffs and silently leads them out to the car. And, when he makes the first turn out of the parking lot, it's a left instead of a right. Which means: Isaac has won and they're going to the McCall house.

"Did you and Malia find anything in the woods?" Isaac asks because they haven't quite covered all their bases yet, because they'd been marginally distracted by the bullet wound.

"No," Derek says. "The hellhound was taken to the morgue already, and there were too many scents around to get a lock on the hunter. The wolves were just as expected too – dead and surrounded by spiders and the scent of fear."

"Fear?" Isaac asks. "From the wolves or the spiders?"

Derek shrugs as he drives, "I don't know. Both, I guess."

Huh.

They don't say anything else for the rest of the drive, just because there isn't much to say. Isaac spends half the time gritting his teeth and expecting some lecture about being careful, but it never comes and the blue-gray shape of the McCall house comes into view.

When they walk up to the front porch and the door swings open, it's Stiles on the other side.

"Isaac?" he questions, face scrunched up with palpable confusion. "I thought you got shot?"

"Oh my god. *Scott*," Isaac complains, shoving past Stiles and into the house, making a point of using his once injured shoulder to bust through.

Because he's immature and because he can. Because he *healed*.

They run through everything that they know, filling each other in as they regroup in the quiet tension of the kitchen. It's dark despite the lights and a feeling of slow dread creeps through the atmosphere as their stories are told.

Scott and Isaac share the limited information they got from Argent: the increase in business and the unknown source of said orders. Scott shares what he learned from Mason and Liam: the faceless body at the school and the feeling of terror that surrounded it. Malia relays what they found in the woods: the slug of a bullet made of silver.

That's arguably the most alarming of the pieces shared. Because silver means the killer is an amateur, a new hunter with new stakes in the game. It's someone that can't be predicted or understood yet, someone who they haven't dealt with before.

It seems like the worst of the news until Lydia and Stiles share what happened at Eichen House.

"He killed every supernatural in the closed unit?" Scott repeats, he's standing with his back to the group, shock running rich in his tone and settling over the rest of them like a blanket of fright. "All of them?"

Isaac wonders if Derek is thinking about Peter, but he doesn't look his way to check.

"He said he couldn't see it any other way," Lydia says. And she sounds calm, but Isaac knows her better than that by now. He knows her saccharine tone is a facade, covering up something far less palatable.

"Well, I've got another way," Malia says, unimpressed and unsympathetic. Simply, she adds, "You don't kill *everyone*."

"I think he was afraid," Lydia says, mostly ignoring Malia in favor of speaking in a quiet voice. She has them hanging on her every word, waiting for the moment when the pin drops, when clarity arises.

Scott turns slowly. He turns to face the kitchen island and, more quickly than expected, the revelation comes from him. "The wolves, the rats." He looks at Isaac. "It keeps coming back to the same thing." And then, "*Fear*."

“But what’s everyone afraid of?” Stiles asks, eyes squinting.

Scott sets the silver slug on the counter with a soft clink. He drops his head with the movement, like it’s all coming together right at this very moment, like they’re witnessing his epiphany.

“Us,” he whispers.

Scott lifts his head and looks out at the group once more, saying, “We don’t know what fear would do to somebody. I mean, it could change them.” Scott swallows, with a glance towards Derek, “They’ll look at us different. They’ll do things that they’ve never done before.”

“People can be so stupid,” Malia says with a shake of her head.

Derek denies the claim and corrects, “They’re not stupid. They’re *scared*.”

“And scared people will do things that you wouldn’t believe.”

Isaac thinks of his father and he knows that it’s true. He thinks of the nogitsune and he knows that fear twists like evil in your veins, that it can take something once purely good and *poison* it.

Fear is like a magnet, a *beacon* for darkness, and now? Now, it’s running rampant through Beacon Hills.

After Images

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 13

Word count: 5,065

Warning: minor character death

Isaac is the last to leave the McCall house. He's lingered longer than he probably should and now he's sitting in the driveway feeling numb in ways he probably shouldn't. After everything they just learned, all the pieces they just put together, he should be a livewire of fear and dread. But he just isn't. He feels empty. He's just switching gears and backing out of the driveway like this is any other night.

Then, just as quickly as he starts, he slams on the breaks.

His tail lights wash over the darkness, bringing with them a glow of sight and the shape of a blond girl standing just inches from the back of the Jeep. Isaac recognizes her at once.

Lori.

Isaac doesn't turn the car all the way off, but he does put it in park, opening his door and climbing out to approach her while the engine rumbles idly.

Lori doesn't hesitate. She cuts right to the chase with, "I found this." She holds up a lacrosse stick, coated with distinct red stains and a coppery, drying scent. "It's Brett's, and he's missing, and I heard gunshots."

Isaac feels an immediate twist in his stomach, a knot of anxiety and worry. And, "How do you know this is his blood?"

"Because he's my brother," Lori says. "It's mine too."

Isaac doesn't know how to argue that, not when he would know Derek's blood just the same. So, he simply nods and says, "Scott's inside. I'll join you in a second, just gotta get my keys."

Lori gives a nod of her own, a show of agreement, and then turns on her heel and marches towards the house with purpose. Isaac watches

her go, listens to her shoes crunch on the gravel and stomp up the steps of the porch. He watches her until the door opens and she steps inside. Only then does he turn his back on the night and grab his keys from the ignition.

Isaac closes the door of the Jeep, but he doesn't rush inside. He takes one extra moment to himself, one last moment of peace and calm before the inevitable calamity that's to come.

For just a moment, he leans against the blue paint and breathes.

—

"Brett's missing and he's hurt. I *know* it," Lori says.

They're once again standing in the McCall kitchen, circling the island as the three of them discuss Brett and his disappearance and what this could possibly mean.

"When was the last time anyone saw him?" Scott asks. He's the one holding the lacrosse stick now, spinning it slowly in his grip and watching the blood gleam in the low light of the room.

"He was helping Liam out with a freshman lacrosse practice," Lori says with a small shrug. Her voice is tight with a panic so fresh Isaac can practically taste it. She whispers, "His car's still in the school parking lot."

Isaac tries not to think about the faceless body in the locker room, but he can't quite help himself. He can't quite stop his mind from straying there, to the image that's being concocted in his head. Something in him just *knows* that it's not Brett's body that was found, but that doesn't mean it's not connected to his being missing, doesn't mean that it's not part of the mystery.

"Okay," Scott says. He looks and sounds like the picture of calm, but Isaac knows it's a mirage. He can see the ever-so-slight trembling of Scott's hands, the way the lacrosse stick wobbles faintly in his hold. "I'll call Liam and maybe Malia too – she has one of the best noses of all of us. We'll find him."

He doesn't say, *I promise*, and Isaac's almost glad for it.

Lori doesn't stick around to ask for that kind of commitment. She's obviously in a rush to find her brother, given the way she's the first one back out the door. As soon as they're filled in, her back is turned

and she's jogging down the steps and into the late evening of Beacon Hills.

Isaac makes a step to follow her, to make sure she isn't alone for long. But then, Scott stops him in his tracks, blocking the door with a sidestep and his body in front of Isaac's.

"You were shot only a couple hours ago. You need to go home and rest."

Isaac feels his jaw set, feels a spark of anger simmering low in his gut. He frowns at Scott, rolls his shoulder back like a demonstration. "Scott, I'm *fine* now. I've healed and the more people we have looking, the more likely we are to find Brett. I—"

"Isaac," Scott says, interrupting with a voice as gentle and easy as he can manage. "Please."

Isaac shakes his head, barely resisting the desire to push past Scott and make the decision on his own. The overly protective caring thing was sweet before, but, now, Isaac feels a little more so genuinely annoyed. Now, he feels a little cheated and small. Because Brett is missing and hurt and Scott could use Isaac's help – Scott *needs* his help.

And yet...

"Go home," Scott is saying.

Isaac takes in the stubborn tilt of Scott's chin and the glow of determination in his eyes, and he knows that Scott isn't going to budge. He knows that he's not going to be able to convince him to let him help. He knows that he's only wasting time by fighting now. And so, he gives.

"Yeah. Okay."

Scott gives a soft smile and an even softer, "Thank you."

Isaac nods and lets Scott pull him into a brief hug. Then, they part ways and Isaac is back in the Jeep with fear in his lungs and a predicament in his hands.

—

Isaac goes, but he doesn't go home. He knows there's a good chance

that Scott is right, that he does need rest and he'd be more of a hindrance than a help in the thick of the action. But that doesn't mean he has to sit idly by, doesn't mean he has to go back to the loft and do *nothing*. That doesn't mean he can't help in a different way.

So, he shows up on Stiles Stilinski's doorstep with a box of books he never unpacked and a falsely innocent smile.

Stiles blinks at him, looking a little bleary. "What are you doing here?"

"Brett's missing and Scott's being a dickhead and refusing to let me help, so we're gonna help from a distance," Isaac says without missing a beat.

Stiles runs a hand through his hair. He's in his pajamas and he smells like mint toothpaste. Meaning: he was about to get into bed and likely hadn't been informed of any of this yet.

But Stiles doesn't look at all surprised or bothered. He takes it in stride, simply shrugs and says, "Yeah, okay. I'm down."

Isaac smiles a little brighter, a little more genuine. *This* is why he loves Stiles.

—

There's a crime board set up in Stiles' bedroom. The rats, the wolves, the hellhound, the Wild Hunt. It's all there already, but there's a few more pieces that need to be added.

Stiles scribbles on the glass with a white marker, writing out, *Faceless corpse?*

And that's about as much detail as he can give. He jots another note of the location, of the body being found in the locker room of the high school, but that's about as much information as they have right now. Stiles sighs, fiddling with the marker and staring at the feeble attempt at filling in the blanks, "I wish they had taken a picture or something."

Isaac scoffs a tense sort of laugh. "You wish Liam and Mason had taken a picture of a skinless corpse?"

Stiles shrugs, "Well, *yeah*. How else are we supposed to know what we're dealing with?"

“We’re dealing with a faceless corpse. What else do you need to know?” Isaac questions. He sits down on the edge of Stiles’ bed, meeting him with quirked eyebrows and a small smirk.

“Lots of things, Isaac. I need to know lots of things.” He caps and uncaps the marker a few times. Then, in the center of the board, he draws a simple silhouette of an anonymous person’s head, decorated with a question mark in the middle and labeled with: *New hunter*.

Now, Isaac is thinking of The Benefactor. He wonders if Stiles is too, wonders if he’s thinking about reason and cause – a cause beyond the initial fear, some reason strong enough to turn terror into *action*.

“The hunter is being motivated by fear,” Stiles says, answering Isaac’s unspoken question. “So, we should try to find the source of the fear. Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Isaac agrees easily. And, “It’s gotta be whatever came out of the Wild Hunt, right?”

“I guess.”

“But I’ve read everything there is to read about the Wild Hunt,” Isaac says. And it’s strange because this might be one of the only areas where Isaac actually has a leg up on Stiles, where he actually knows more, where he has more to offer. “I’ve never heard of anything being trapped in the Hunt.”

Stiles hums.

Isaac pales. Quickly, he says, “Sorry, sorry. Bad word choice. Obviously, *you* were trapped in the Hunt, but it wasn’t like – like super intentional.”

Isaac clenches his fists, fighting the urge to facepalm into his hand, to groan at his own stupidity and never show his face again.

And then, Stiles laughs. It’s this easy and sort of delighted sound, this light chuckle of, “Relax. That wasn’t a hum of ‘you’re an idiot.’ I was just... humming.”

“Oh,” Isaac says, hands going slack. Because now he *really* feels like an idiot.

Stiles laughs again, a little more heartily this time, like he’s taking pleasure in Isaac’s suffering. Isaac wants to shove him, but he’s too far

away to reach, so, instead, he kicks out a leg. It snags on the back of Stiles' calf.

Stiles whirls around with a harsh glare and a performative, "Ow."

Isaac rolls his eyes. He pushes up the sleeves of his cardigan, letting the fabric bunch up around his elbows. He fidgets and tries to focus back on the board in front of them, the task ahead of them. He says, "I mean, I guess, technically, *we* trapped Douglas in the Hunt."

"You think it could be him?" Stiles asks. The disbelief is apparent in his voice, but he turns to look at Isaac anyway, giving him his attention and some genuine curiosity.

Isaac shakes his head, "No. No, we watched him get turned into a Ghost Rider. I'm just thinking out loud. Like, we fought this guy and then got rid of him by letting him get taken by the Ghost Riders. Maybe it's something like that."

Stiles sighs, "I guess that kind of makes sense. But how would this *something* avoid getting turned into a Ghost Rider?" He shakes the marker between his fingers, lets it jump in his grip and slap against his palm with a repetitive and only slightly irritating sound. "I mean, Liam said the hellhound said it was supposed to ride in the Hunt forever, which means it was trapped there for ages before we let it out."

"I don't know," Isaac says, but he's not really sure what question he's answering. It's more of a general declaration as he flops back in Stiles' bed, knees still bent over the edge as his eyes turn to stare up at the ceiling. "Maybe it's banshee adjacent? Like, what would have happened to Lydia if she'd willingly gone into the Hunt to save you and then you'd *both* gotten stuck?"

It's an interesting question. They know the Ghost Riders would've left Lydia alone, would've left her behind while they took the rest of the town. But there's no answer for what would happen to a banshee who willingly went into the Hunt because, prior to Liam, there was no precedent for *anyone* willingly going into the Hunt.

"Let's not go there," Stiles says, like he doesn't care how interesting the question is, like the mere thought of something bad happening to Lydia is too much for him to bear.

And Isaac really does get that, so he simply says, "Okay."

“The animals are weird though, right?” Stiles says. He’s staring at the crime board so intensely, leaving only a few inches between his face and the clippings. Isaac has half a mind to tell him to back up.

“Yeah,” Isaac says. “Scott said it reminded him of everything that happened before the darach.”

“If there are any more human sacrifices, I swear to god, *I’m* going to sacrifice *myself*,” Stiles says in a quick rush of exasperation and annoyance.

Isaac pointedly doesn’t mention that he kind of already did that. Instead, he just yawns up at the ceiling.

—

“Isaac,” Stiles says. They’re both on his bed now – Stiles sitting up by the headboard and Isaac still flopped down on the edge. “Go home or go find Scott.”

Isaac yawns into his hand for the fifth time and does neither. He lets his thoughts run haywire and everywhere, hoping that, eventually, something will click and clarity will be found.

Stiles nudges him with a sock clad foot.

Isaac tilts his head back far enough to glare at Stiles, saying, “That’s my shoulder that was just *shot*, y’know.”

“The one you keep saying is fine?” Stiles tests. He presses a little harder with his toes. “Great.”

Isaac jerks his shoulder up to try to force Stiles away from him.

“Seriously, though,” Stiles says when he gives up trying to kick Isaac in the face, “why couldn’t you have just gone with Scott? I mean, I really don’t think we’re helping much at all.”

Isaac props himself up on his elbows, but looks out at the crime board instead of back at Stiles. “Because,” he says, “he told me to go home. If I went after him anyway, he’d just be annoyed that I didn’t listen. *But...* if we figure this out, then he’ll just be glad that we saved Brett and he won’t *care* that I didn’t listen.”

“Isaac...” Stiles says, like he’s so completely unimpressed, like he can’t believe what he’s hearing. He heaves an exhale, purging all the air

from his lungs in one gust of breath. Then, “You are the biggest tragedy that I’ve ever met, so, for that reason alone, I’m going to give you some insight, okay?”

“Okay,” Isaac says. He feels like he should be offended, but instead his voice comes small with his anticipation, with his wonder.

“It’s got *nothing* to do with Scott being annoyed at you for,” Stiles throws in some irritating air quotes, “‘not listening.’” He drops the layer of teasing amusement and falls into something more gentle and sincere, “Scott wants to save and protect everyone, but... he wants to protect you most of all.”

Isaac’s heart melts a little at the words, but he doesn’t let it show, merely says, “That’s dumb. I’m also a werewolf, remember? Like, I can actually protect myself.”

Stiles goes quiet for a long moment. The silence stretches between them like a rubber band pulling taut, pulling with tension.

“Stiles?” Isaac asks, turning finally to look at him now.

Stiles’ brows are sad and his expression is contemplative. He runs a spread palm over his sheets, feeling the material wrinkle and smooth under his touch. He watches his hand, watches the movement.

Then, he goes still and looks up at Isaac. He lets their eyes meet.

“That’s what Allison used to say.”

—

Isaac still doesn’t leave. Even hearing what Stiles had to say, even recognizing the truth in the statement, he doesn’t go anywhere. But, now, it’s not because of some strange inability to upset Scott, some misplaced fear there. Now, it’s just because he thinks there’s something to be found among the evidence on the crime board.

“We’re thinking too big,” Isaac says after a while. He’d migrated to the floor at some point, leaning back against Stiles’ bed and staring up at the board, like somehow the different perspective would open his eyes to something he hadn’t noticed before.

“What?” Stiles asks. He’s back to standing, pacing a little with the thoughts mulling in his mind.

“We’re thinking too big,” Isaac repeats. “Whatever came out of the Hunt, whatever’s causing the fear, we’re not going to be able to defeat it tonight. Just the two of us pulling an all-nighter? Yeah, right.”

“So, what? You’re giving up?” Stiles questions. He’s stopped walking back and forth now, instead staring down at Isaac with something just short of thinly veiled contempt.

“No,” Isaac says. “I just think we need to redirect our attention. We might not be able to eliminate the fear, but we could possibly stop the new hunter. Or, at least, stop them from killing Brett.”

Stiles’ eyebrows lift. “Oh. Oh, yeah. Yes. Okay.”

And so, they shift their focus away from the corpse and onto the biggest question mark on the board. The new hunter and their identity, their motive, their plan.

“Hunters don’t just appear, right?” Stiles says. His voice tints with something like an idea, something that’s gaining ground and gaining traction. “They’re usually a descendent of the Argents and they’ve been trained, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Isaac says.

“So...” Stiles drags out, nodding a little rapidly. “An amateur hunter *shouldn’t* exist.”

Isaac stares up at him a little blankly, head cocking to one side as his tiredness gets the better of him, blocking the epiphany from fully forming.

Fortunately, Stiles explains. “I mean that... hunters are trained and taught and tested. New ones don’t just pop out of nowhere, especially not while making the number one mistake of using a silver bullet.”

Isaac nods as things become a little clearer, pressing up to his feet and standing next to Stiles as the realization mounts into something tangible, something they can act on and utilize. “So... it’s not a descendant of the Argents?”

“I don’t think so,” Stiles answers. “I don’t think this person has any prior connection to the hunters, but... now that they’ve done the supposed-to-be-impossible and killed a hellhound...?”

“They’re not just going to draw the attention of the supernatural,”

Isaac fills in the blank. "The hunters are going to notice too."

"Exactly," Stiles says, bouncing on his heels just a little.

Isaac isn't sharing in his inappropriate excitement. He wants to. He wants to see this as a victory, as a gained advantage of knowledge, but...

"Stiles," he says, a little more stern than usual, a little closer to warning. "That means *Gerard*."

Stiles stops moving altogether. His body goes stiff as a board and he looks seconds away from letting out a guttural groan of frustration.

"If he doesn't already know about this new hunter, then he's definitely going to soon," Isaac says.

Stiles nods. "Which means we can't underestimate them."

The hunter might be an amateur now, but they won't be for long. If Gerard gets through to them, if he twists his way inside this hunter's head, it's only a matter of time before this mild threat becomes a huge problem. There's no telling what could happen.

Just then, there's a creak at the window and a squeaking of the pane opening. Footsteps drop down behind them and Stiles lets out an almighty *scream* of fear.

In an instant, Isaac is doubled over with laughter.

Because it's only Derek. Because Isaac clocked his scent immediately. Because Stiles is red in the face and shouting loud enough to wake the whole neighborhood with, "What the hell are you doing here!"

Derek doesn't acquiesce to the volume, simply states in his usual tone, "Isaac never came back to the loft and I heard about Brett."

Isaac stops laughing and crosses his arms over his chest, glaring weakly at Derek. "You tracked me by scent? That's such a violation."

"The violation was breaking into my house!" Stiles says and he's still yelling. His face is screwed up against the redness, making him look more and more like his father. "Why didn't you just come to the front door like a normal person!"

"Because I didn't know if your dad would be home."

“Did you see the cruiser in the driveway?”

“All right, all right, all right,” Isaac complains, cutting them off and stepping between them before they can get any further in their petty bickering. And, less urgently but still just as desperate, “Can we get back to Brett? Please?”

“Well,” Derek says, turning his attention away from Stiles and over to Isaac. “You’re right about Gerard and the hunters, but it doesn’t matter.” Isaac feels himself wrinkling with almost offended confusion, but Derek just keeps talking, “You don’t need to find the new hunter, you need to find *Brett*.”

“Okay...” Isaac says because he knows Derek already has something figured out, already has some idea that he’s leading them towards.

“Brett is a born wolf,” Derek says. “Which means he learned all the same things from Satomi that I learned from my mother.”

(And hearing Derek speak of his mom is such a rarity, spreads a pulse of shock through Isaac’s veins, but he tries to ignore the surprise, tries not to let it show.)

Instead, Isaac focuses on the implications there, remembers the story of Derek and Paige and the nemeton. He breathes an understanding of, “Hide and heal.”

Derek nods, continues with, “We go underground.”

“The tunnels,” Stiles finishes.

Because *of course* he’s in the tunnels.

—

They rush into the woods and towards the nearest entrance to the tunnels. Isaac is distantly aware that he’s running past the spot of his and Scott’s first kiss, but he doesn’t let himself get distracted by the fond memories.

Right now, his focus has to be Brett, has to be the snarky but kind werewolf that has always been an ally to them, that has always helped in any way he could – even when it meant putting his own life on the line.

“We need to be careful,” Derek warns as they approach the ladder. “If

Gerard is involved, he would know that this is where Brett would go.”

Isaac and Stiles each give nods of agreement, and then they’re climbing down into the tunnels.

Isaac is last down the rungs of the ladder and the last to step into the dank light of the space. He’s the last to turn around and catch the scent of blood. He’s the last to notice Scott.

Malia is kneeling at his side, grappling desperately at his arm, but Isaac’s eyes pass right over her. They land on the thick, bloodied, spiked arrow – or whatever the name for it is, Isaac’s knowledge of weaponry stalls around Chinese daggers – on the ground of the tunnel and the circle of red around Scott’s stomach. They flick up to the pained twist in Scott’s brow and the paleness of his skin. He’s ghostly and damp with sweat, eyes a little glassy and blinking slowly in the dark.

And Isaac feels like he’s the one who’s just been stabbed. He feels the pain even when he hasn’t started taking it yet, even when he’s just standing there and staring at Scott as he fights against the agony and the weakness and the vulnerability of this injury.

It’s a physical pain, this watching of his love being hurt so badly. It stings and wraps around his heart like barbed wire.

“I can’t take his pain,” Malia says, spewing the words more quickly than any of them can react, can move. “I’ve been – I’ve been trying, but I can’t – can’t concentrate.”

Stiles catches Malia’s arm as she stumbles to her feet and away from Scott. He guides her back and away with comforting gestures, but Isaac isn’t paying them any attention.

He unsticks his feet from the floor and crashes to Scott’s aid. He cups his face in one hand, immediately drawing pain through the gentle touch, stroking over the ridge of his brow. His other hand gets a stabilizing grip on Scott’s shoulder, a whisper of, *“It’s okay. You’re okay.”*

“You need to,” Scott winces and grunts. “You need to go after Liam and Lori. It’s a – It’s Gerard. It’s a trap.”

“We know,” Isaac says, low and warm and gentle. “We know. It’s okay, I’ve got you.”

Isaac looks over his shoulder, at Derek and Stiles and Malia. Stiles looks terrified, looks like all the color has bled out through the soles of his feet, pooling around him on the floor of the tunnel.

Isaac gives him the most reassuring look he can muster and says, “Go. I’ve got this.”

Stiles hesitates, but he still has a grip on Malia, so, when she runs, he gets dragged along. Their footsteps echo throughout the cavernous space of the tunnels until they’ve disappeared out of sight and faded from Isaac’s focus.

“I can,” Scott hisses, “I can feel it healing. I’m gonna be fine.”

“I know,” Isaac says easily. “I know. You’re okay.”

Isaac’s eyes feel a little wet and it’s all so silly. Because the pain he’s taking is starting to slow and Isaac *knows* Scott is healing, but that doesn’t make this any easier to digest. It doesn’t make it any easier to find Scott like this – so hurt and so weak.

Isaac plants a kiss to his forehead, whispers, “This is why we don’t split up.”

“I know,” Scott whispers back. Part of Isaac wants to tell him not to talk, wants to tell him to save his strength, but he doesn’t. He just listens as Scott says, “I know, I’m sorry. I just – seeing you hurt. Scared me. I didn’t know what to do.”

“Sh,” Isaac hushes him gently. “It’s okay. I’m... I’m scared too.”

Because Scott is at least a little bit bleeding out in this tunnel right now and Gerard is so obviously back on their bad side and Brett is missing and they just sent their friends running into a known trap.

“We’re all scared right now,” Isaac says softly. Because it’s true. Because terror is working its way through Beacon Hills like a plague, and they’d be naive to think they’re immune to it just because they have more of an ability to protect themselves than most. “But we’re stronger together.”

Scott lets his head fall back against the metal wall behind him. His lips quirk in a tiny smile and he says, “I hate these fucking tunnels.”

Isaac gives an even slighter chuckle of amusement. “Yeah, me too.”

He keeps leeching in Scott's pain, even as the stream slows to a trickle. He just keeps drawing black through his veins, keeps giving Scott every ounce of relief he can. He lets the burden slide over his hand and up his wrist and across his arm, lets it burn and tickle and tint his skin black and pink. He lets himself take and lets himself comfort, even as he knows Scott doesn't really need it, even as he knows Scott can handle it. Just because he *can* handle it, doesn't mean he should, doesn't mean he *has* to.

"You never went home, did you?" Scott asks when his breathing has evened out and filled into something more normal and less shallow.

Isaac answers with a simple, "Nope. I went to Stiles'."

Isaac uses the sleeve of his sweater to dry the sweat from Scott's face – there's already bloodstains on the fabric anyway. Scott smiles up at him, easy as anything.

A roar echoes through the tunnels. It's not a howl, it's not a growl, it's a full fledged *roar*. It rumbles through the space, guided by pipes around winding corners and down long halls. It travels the distance until it meets Isaac and Scott's ears, until the pain of the bellow grazes their skin and sets their hearts on fire.

Something is wrong.

"Scott," Isaac says. There's a little bit of panic in his voice now. "Do you – Do you think you can get up?"

"Not sure I have much of a choice," Scott says, already pushing up against the stone of the floor, pressing into Isaac's ready hands. He pants as they get him propped back up in his feet, and, with his weight mostly supported by Isaac, he says, "That was Liam."

Isaac already knows, already knows what the agony there probably means. But he's not going to believe it yet, not till he's certain.

"I know," Isaac says.

Then, without discussion or another word, they start the trek towards the other end of the tunnels, following in the direction that the roar came from. And, the closer they get, the stronger the scent of pain becomes, the more easily the trail is followed and tracked.

They keep walking in a slowly limping gait until, eventually, they find another grate leading up to the surface, propped open and letting in sounds of whispers and aching sobs.

Isaac helps Scott climb up and then follows after him.

As soon as they breach the grate, they find themselves standing in the middle of the street. It's busier than it has any right to be this late at night. There are cars all around them, shining headlights on the scene of the crime and bringing seemingly innocent passersby into the fray of destruction.

As soon as they breach the grate, they spot Liam. He's standing with his claws, fangs, and glowing eyes out. He's red rimmed with tears and he's sobbing with *anger*. It's fresh and harsh and pungent, making Liam's heart stumble and panic in his chest with a grief he doesn't know what to do with.

As soon as they breach the grate, Isaac sees their bodies.

Brett and Lori lie dead in the middle of the road.

Brett, who was a fierce fighter, who was strong, who was ruthless, who was *fearless*. Lori, who always wanted to help, who was kind, who was generous, who Isaac spoke to only hours ago.

As soon as they breach the grate, Isaac buckles with loss, with regret, with pain. His hand finds Scott in the swirl of emotion, fingers knitting together just as Brett and Lori's hands are clasped – one last stretch of love in their final moment.

Face-to-Faceless

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 14

Word count: 9,768

The McCall house is dark and quiet when they return, but Isaac doesn't bother to turn any lights on. He merely places a hand at the small of Scott's back and uses night vision to guide them both up the stairs and down the hall to his bedroom.

Scott sits on the edge of his bed, looking for all the world like he wants to bury his head in his hands, but he doesn't. He's far too aware of the blood that covers his palms and Isaac is too. It's all his own, Isaac knows, but that doesn't make him feel any better. He knows the blood comes from the since healed wound of his abdomen, but he sees the red and his mind deceives him, paints with images of the pooling on the road and the bodies.

"Come on," Isaac says gently, forcing the hauntings from his mind. "You should take a shower."

Scott doesn't move. He doesn't lift his eyes from his hands either. He simply whispers, "It's my fault."

Isaac quickly closes the space between them, kneeling down towards the ground. He puts his hands on Scott's knees and forces their eyes to meet. He gives a short shake of his head and says, "No."

"If I had let you come, then Derek would've been there too, and we would've figured it out sooner, and--"

"Scott," Isaac says. His voice cracks a little on the syllable, can't quite hold up against the emotional weight of it all. "You weren't holding the gun. You weren't behind the wheel. You didn't kill them."

"But I didn't *save* them either," Scott whispers. He blinks and a tear rolls down his cheek.

Isaac doesn't wipe it away, if only because his own hands are similarly stained – only a little less worse for wear than Scott's, only safe to stay over the fabric of Scott's jeans. He strokes his thumb there, gently soothing circles over his knee, into the rough denim.

“Let’s get cleaned up,” Isaac says instead of furthering his protests. Because he knows that’s not what Scott needs right now, because he knows Scott won’t believe a word he says. So, he lies, “Everything will feel better when we aren’t surrounded by the scent of your blood.”

And it’s not true, not really. It might feel better on the surface, but nothing is going to touch the mourning within them. Nothing is going to touch the blame and the heartache of seeing two of their allies – two of their *friends* – slaughtered.

But there’s nothing they can do to change what happened. There’s nothing that Isaac can say. All he can do is help to ease the pain, to make it more livable, more breathable. All he can do is try to make this better.

Scott gives a small nod and Isaac helps him to his feet. Scott isn’t physically injured anymore, doesn’t need the supporting hand on his arm, but Isaac isn’t letting go. He walks him to the bathroom and washes his own hands under the warm water of the sink, watching it tint with pink and run down the drain, the evidence of Scott’s wound disappearing.

Then, Isaac says, “I’ll be right outside the door, okay?”

Scott nods again and Isaac leaves him alone. He sits with his back against the door, simultaneously too close and too far away. He listens to the stream of water coming down, imagines that he can hear the quiet sounds of Scott crying. And Isaac doesn’t let himself do the same, or maybe he just *can’t*. Maybe he’s given all the tears he has for dead friends, maybe he’s run himself dry.

Isaac just sits with his back against the door and waits.

—

Isaac moves when he hears the water shut off, so Scott won’t open the door and trip right over him. So that, instead, he steps out in a rush of steam and a clean t-shirt and threadbare pajamas.

“Are you... Are you gonna stay?” Scott asks, so quiet and so tentative Isaac almost breaks with it.

“Do you want me to?” he asks in its place.

Scott ponders it for a moment, like he’s not sure of his answer, like he didn’t realize he could ever ask for anything at all, like he didn’t

realize taking was an option. Silence passes between them, stretching on for almost a full minute until Scott nods and says, “Yeah. If that’s okay?”

Isaac nods back, says, “Sure. Let me just text Derek.”

He pulls his phone from his pocket and fires off a simple text: **Staying at Scott’s. Be home in the morning.** Meanwhile, Scott rifles through his closet, coming up with a familiar green hoodie and a pair of sweatpants. He hands them over to Isaac and gestures towards the bathroom and Isaac goes easily.

He leaves the door open just a crack, mostly because the steam and the heat of the room make it seem smaller than it is. And, quickly, he changes his clothes, swapping out the dirtied shirt for the cozy sweatshirt. It smells like Scott and that soothes some of Isaac’s prickling edges.

When he comes out of the bathroom, Scott’s bedroom light is still off and he’s slipped under the covers. It’s probably too close to morning to get a good night’s sleep, but Isaac joins him anyway, tries not to overthink it as he rests his head on the other pillow, staring into Scott’s eyes.

It’s warm, though Isaac thinks that has less to do with the layers of clothing and the thick comforter and more to do with the shared space. They’ve lazed around in both of their beds together before, but never under the covers and never under the blanket of darkness. The closest they ever got to something like this was the pallet on the floor of the loft.

There’s a quiet intimacy to this moment, something about knowing that, despite the shadows of the room, they can see each other perfectly. Isaac can feel as Scott’s chest rises and falls, can feel the minute shift of the blankets.

“I’m sorry,” Scott says into the dark. His breath tickles at Isaac’s chin when he says, “I should’ve let you come with us.”

Isaac frowns a little, mouth twisting into, “It’s because of Allison, isn’t it?”

And, somehow, it feels safe to bring her up here. In this delicate space between them, between night and morning. It feels okay to breathe her name into existence.

“My first love died in my arms,” Scott says. His voice is a little detached, but Isaac hears the traces of feeling there, the scars that will never fully heal. “I don’t know what I would do if... something happened to my second.”

Isaac makes a quiet noise in the back of his throat before he can stop it. It’s a catch of his breath and a soft sound of surprise. Not because he doesn’t already know that Scott loves him, but because they haven’t said it aloud yet.

And Isaac isn’t so disillusioned to think that that’s because of anyone but him. He knows he’s the reason the words haven’t been spoken yet.

“Scott...” he whispers like a warning, like he’s almost begging Scott not to take this further than the implication has already gone.

“Iz,” Scott says back, like a prayer. “I understand that it’s hard for you to say it. I get that and you don’t have to say a thing. But... can I? Can I say it?”

And, against all odds, Isaac finds himself smiling. It’s a quiet thing, just a twitching at his lips. It’s something about the way Scott asks permission – the way he’s so careful to make sure that Isaac feels okay, that he doesn’t make him uncomfortable, that he doesn’t cross a line.

“Yeah,” Isaac says. “Yeah. Go on.”

Scott’s lips twitch too.

“I love you,” he says softly.

And Isaac could say it back. He feels it, deep in his chest like a bloom of flowers filling the gaps of his ribs. He can taste the words on his tongue, can imagine letting them break free. But he keeps his mouth shut and presses his lips to Scott’s for one, two, three seconds.

Scott smiles faintly, but it falters just a little as their eyes meet. He puts a hand on Isaac’s cheek, rubbing gentle with his thumb. He whispers, “It’s not just about Allison though.”

“Hm?”

“It’s not just that you got hurt,” Scott says, still with that cradling hand. “It’s the way that it happened. You didn’t even know the guy and you let yourself get shot. I just–” Scott’s hand slips more towards

Isaac's neck, fingers playing in the hair he can reach. "What would you have done to save Brett? Or Liam? Or Stiles? Or... me?"

Isaac has to admit: he's a little dumbfounded. His eyebrows drag down and his lips turn in a confused sort of pout and, for a moment, he stares at Scott. For a moment, he wonders how he doesn't already know.

Then, he says, "I'd do exactly what you would, Scott."

Because I'm only the person I am because of you.

Scott sighs, lets two fingers pinch and pull on a curl. "That's not very reassuring. You know that?"

"Yeah," Isaac says. "Yeah, I know."

Scott's eyes flicker with little sparks of amusement. And nothing is okay right now, but at least they have this. At least they have each other and the quiet of the night.

—

The morning comes faster than Isaac wants it to. The sun blares in through window panes and brings light to Isaac's eyes. He blinks awake to an empty bed, to Scott hopping into a pair of jeans.

"Morning," Isaac says quietly, rolling over and stretching a little.

Scott flicks his button closed and turns on him with a small smile, "Hey. I didn't know if I should wake you or not, but I kinda have to go?"

"Oh?" Isaac questions, sitting up a little, but not yet escaping from the comfort of the covers.

"Yeah," Scott says. "I need to check on Liam, make sure he actually goes to school, y'know? I think it's best if he just pretends like nothing happened last night."

Like no one saw him in a full shift.

Isaac's heart aches for the younger beta, for the sudden loss of two of his friends and the loss of his anonymity. All in one night, Liam has suffered grief and blame and terror. All in one night, he's become a pariah.

“Okay,” Isaac says. He wants to offer to go with Scott, doesn’t really want to let him out of his sight at all today, but he also knows that Scott and Liam need this moment together, just the two of them. So, instead, he only offers, “D’you want a ride?”

“Nah, take your time, I’ll just take my bike,” Scott says. He crosses the room, leans over to press a kiss to Isaac’s forehead, and says, “I’ll see you later?”

“Yeah,” Isaac says. “See you.”

He’s pretty sure he’s flushed with warmth and he’s pretty sure Scott can plainly see that, but he doesn’t say anything. He ducks out of the room with another goodbye and Isaac waits until he hears the front door close to bury his face in a pillow.

Isaac considers waiting around the McCall house for Scott to get back, but, in the end, the silence gets too much for him. The house feels a little gaunt, feels a little stiff with the feeling of loss like a straight jacket on Isaac’s shoulders. It’s easier to leave into the fresh air and the familiar comfort of the Jeep, it’s easier to try to run from the pain in his bones.

And so, Isaac goes back to the loft to await the next development.

Isaac’s not sure what he’s expecting Derek to say – maybe something forcibly reassuring. Instead, he’s greeted with a pointed smirk and, “You never came home last night.”

“Yeah?” Isaac shrugs, brows crinkling. He narrows his eyes at Derek, trying to understand what’s written between the words. He says, “I texted you. I was with Scott.”

“Overnight...?”

It’s tilted and lopsided and Isaac knows what this is now. This is Derek trying to lighten the mood, trying to bring some levity to the dread hanging over them, trying to diffuse the stench of pain with attempts at humor.

“Is this – Is this supposed to be teasing?” Isaac asks, giving a small huff of laughter, a series of exhaled breaths. He shakes his head, runs a hand through his hair, and, “You’re terrible at this older brother stuff.”

The words are out of Isaac's mouth before he can stop them. They cross the threshold of his lips and step into the space of the loft, and then that's it. Isaac just stands there with his mouth halfway to closed and his heartbeat spiking in his chest.

Because everyone knows Isaac sees Derek as an older brother, but that doesn't mean he's ever admitted it before. He got close once, back in Mexico when exhaustion made his filter drop, but, even then, he'd been too stilted and scared to make it true.

And, now, he's blurted it out on a random Monday morning and there's nothing he can do to take it back.

Derek looks as shocked as Isaac feels, but, fortunately, he knows when to let things go. Sometimes, he pushes. Sometimes, he prods at Isaac and tests his limits. But, now, he just laughs it off and says, "Go take a shower and I'll make us some breakfast."

Isaac sags with relief and a thankful smile.

—

"They were murdered," Scott says, standing in the bunker and twisting the bloodied lacrosse stick in his hand. He drops it onto the table, slamming it a bit more harshly than he likely intended. "Killed by the new hunter."

"When he took out the hellhound, we thought it was luck," Stiles cuts in, rambling a little with the information and the heavy atmosphere of grief. "That we were dealing with an amateur. But now we know that, whoever this new hunter is, he has a teacher."

"Gerard," Argent fills in. His arms are crossed over his chest and there's no emotion in his expression, but his words convey a layer of guilt, "Which means this is my fault. I'm the one who let him go."

"You couldn't have done anything," Lydia says.

"He could've killed him," Malia interjects unapologetically.

Argent tilts his head to one side, eyebrows tilting to mean, *she has a point*. Lydia doesn't share in the same sentiment, and neither does Scott. He levels Malia with an unimpressed stare.

She shrugs, "Just saying."

“We’re not executioners,” Lydia says.

“You are when it comes to war,” Malia counters.

Isaac’s not sure which one of them is right. He doesn’t want to have to kill anyone, but, realistically, what’s one life for the hundreds that will be lost if they let Gerard get his plans off the ground?

“That’s why we’re going to make peace,” Scott says, blindly optimistic as ever.

“With *Gerard*?” Stiles questions, more than a little exasperated and incredulous.

“You know what’s coming,” Scott says, shaking his head. “We all keep using the same word.”

“War,” Isaac says, filling in the empty space and finishing Scott’s thought.

For a moment, tense silence stretches in between them. It’s brief, only a handful of seconds, but it feels like Isaac is holding his breath underwater. Each tick of time feels longer, more painful, more difficult to withstand.

“So, what stops a war from happening?” Malia asks.

“Peace summit.”

“Right,” Scott says, animated as he latches onto the words from Argent. “We meet face-to-face with Gerard, find out what he wants, and then we stop all this before it gets any worse.”

It sounds so simple when Scott says it like that, but as Lydia notes, “The last time Gerard was at a peace summit was with Deucalion.” And, as an unnecessary reminder, “He blinded him and then killed everybody else, *including* his own men.”

Argent steps around the edge of the table, coming toe to toe with Scott. He says, arms still crossed, “I’ll go.” He gives a half-hearted shrug, “I mean, he’s not going to kill me.”

Isaac thinks of that night when the kanima was put to rest, remembers the words out of Gerard’s mouth, remembers the way his heart rate stayed steady when he announced, “*When it comes to survival? I’d kill my own son.*”

“Are you sure about that?” Derek asks. And Isaac knows he’s reliving the same memory.

Argent looks over at Derek, and he’s there too, there in the warehouse and the blurring of enemy lines. He says, “Not really.”

Isaac doesn’t like the sound of any of this, doesn’t like the complete and utter lack of confidence in this room, but they might not have any other option. They might have no other choice than to face the risk of sending Argent into the lion’s den.

“All we need,” Scott says, “is to find out what he wants. Then, we can bargain.”

Argent squints at Scott, a little assessing. “Even if he does agree, his *terms* might be difficult to meet.”

Because the issue is: Gerard has the upper hand and he knows it. He knows they’re desperate to keep the bloodshed at a minimum while he revels in the carnage. He knows Scott’s greatest hope has always been to save the lives of the innocent, and Isaac has no doubts that Gerard will happily use that against him.

“Well, that’s why it’s a negotiation. I—” Scott breaks off a little, continues with a shake of his head and, “I don’t expect to get anything without giving something up.”

“Then you’re going to have to consider just how much you’re willing to give, and how far you’re willing to go to stop a war.”

Isaac clears his throat against phantom sand.

—

While Argent goes to meet with Gerard, the rest of the group splits off, gradually making their way back out of the tunnels and up to the surface. As he’s exiting the bunker, Stiles catches Isaac’s wrist.

“Hey,” he says. And they’re the last two left in the space now, quiet lingering around them and bringing a feeling of privacy.

“Hi?” Isaac greets.

“Are you okay? You know, like, is everything good with Scott and—?” Stiles’ question trails off in a stilted sort of awkwardness, but Isaac understands it at once.

Stiles had been privy to the small amount of tension between them, to the smothering of Scott's worry and the ache of Isaac's desire to *help*. And, now, in the aftermath, he's checking in, checking their status. It's nice, almost makes Isaac smile if not for the reminder of these tunnels and the sadness he can't quite shake today.

"Yeah," Isaac says softly. He's remembering the cocoon of Scott's bed and the whispering of those three words. And that's enough for a tiny smile, a tiny slip of his lips in one direction. "Yeah, everything's good. And... you were right."

"Wait, sorry," Stiles says, holding an infuriating hand up to his own ear. "Can you say that again? I didn't quite catch that?"

Isaac flips him off and Stiles stretches up on his toes to try to ruffle his hair. Isaac bats his hand away before he succeeds and escapes out of the bunker before Stiles can pester him further.

Stiles follows after him, quiet laughter echoing through the cavernous space as they cross from the dark tunnels back into the sunshine of early afternoon. The pair part without saying anything – Stiles naturally trailing off after Lydia while Scott joins Isaac on the edge of the grate, like he was impatiently waiting for him the whole time.

"So, since we have nothing to do now but wait," Scott says, aiming for casual but sounding more rehearsed than that, "would you want to go for a drive or get some food or something?"

Isaac narrows his eyes. "What? Like a date?"

Scott releases a breath of bright laughter. It sounds so foreign in the darkness of the day. "Don't look so surprised. We are already dating, don't you remember? Or did you hit your head coming up the ladder?"

Isaac knocks a shoulder into Scott's, a brush of mostly fake annoyance and an excuse to touch him. He rolls his eyes and says, "Sure, we can go on a date."

And Isaac knows that's not what this really is. It's not *just* a date. It's also a distraction. But that's okay. Isaac doesn't mind. They'll make do with what they've got, they'll make the most of this moment.

—

The Jeep is parked in a mostly empty lot, cupholders full of

milkshakes and windows rolled down enough to let a soft breeze in.

“How’d it go with Liam?” Isaac asks. He’d been avoiding bringing it up back at the bunker, but, now, with chocolate coating their tongues and the warm sunshine beaming on the windshield, it feels a little less harsh, a little safer to address.

Scott shrugs. “I don’t know. He didn’t want to go, but I convinced him to anyway.” Scott’s mouth twists in a little sideways smirk. He looks at Isaac across the center console and, like it’s something worth bragging about, he adds, “I told him to be Clark Kent.”

Isaac chokes a little on the sip of his drink. He coughs, shakes his head, “What?”

“I told him to be like Clark Kent,” Scott says. He looks far too proud of himself, giving a measly explanation of, “Y’know, like, go to school and just be a regular person.”

Isaac frowns a little, drags out an, “Okay...?”

Scott pouts right back at him. “Why aren’t you impressed by my use of nerdy metaphors?”

Isaac drops his frown and laughs now. Because, now, he sees what Scott was getting at. Now, he understands why the topic had such an unnecessary weight to it. Scott’s trying to *impress* him. And that’s so sweet it almost puts Isaac’s milkshake to shame.

However, Isaac doesn’t show how easily enamored he is. Instead, he says, pointed and mimicking, “We’re already dating,” and, he mumbles, “idiot.”

Scott chuckles and sucks on his straw hard enough to make a bubbling noise at the base of the cup. Isaac scoffs at his antics, but lets him be.

Well, until Scott’s phone buzzes on the console. It lights up with a text for both of them to read, a message from Liam, covering the image of Isaac with the words: **It’s the guidance counselor. Tamara Monroe. She’s the new hunter.**

—

“Melissa, he was dead in your arms once before and you had to bring him back yourself. What if this is the one fight he doesn’t come back from?”

Isaac's heart is in his throat, but he swallows it down and steps through the back door with Scott. They're holding hands, but Isaac's not sure when that happened – probably around the mention of Scott's dead body.

"There doesn't have to be a fight," Scott says, clueing Melissa and Argent in to their arrival and drawing their attention.

Argent gives an unimpressed sort of sigh and tilts his head. "Do you know something I don't?"

"Someone," Scott corrects. He squeezes Isaac's hand for a fraction of a second and then lets go, crossing into the living room and holding out his phone for his mom and Argent to see.

"Tamara Monroe," Scott announces. "She's the new hunter. She's the guidance counselor at the school and Lydia's talking to her right now. If we can get through to her..."

Then we could stop all of this before it even starts.

Argent's eyes are wide and he's listening, but he's not wholly considering. "Scott..." he sighs again, shakes his head. "I know you have this gift of seeing the good in people, but Gerard is the exact opposite. He sees a speck of darkness and he *capitalizes* on it. You have to remember how quickly he got into Allison's head."

"And that was without a supernatural creature amplifying her fear," Isaac says. Though, on the inside, he's thinking that kanima might as well have done that, might as well have made everything so much worse.

"How do we know he hasn't already corrupted Monroe?" Argent poses. "I mean, we know *nothing* about her. We'd be going in completely blind."

Scott's listening, but he's not considering either. He stands firm and says, "We have to at least try. If this is our once chance to stop an all out war, then we have to take it – no matter the risk." Scott swallows, hand not holding his phone tucked into a fist at his side, knuckles going pale with the grip. He says, "We *can't* run. We have to try."

And Isaac knows Scott is right, but that doesn't make him any less terrified.

“Scott, this could be a trap,” Isaac says, following him up the stairs and down the hall to his bedroom. It’s different than the night before. Now, the darkness around them is figurative, it’s made of fear and dread and worry.

“What do you want me to do?” Scott questions. “Not go?” He shakes his head. “Gerard is recruiting new hunters and *murdering* our friends. He’s not going to stop unless I can convince him that we’re *not* the enemy.”

“I know that,” Isaac says. He keeps his voice calm even though he’s a flurry of emotions within. He locks eyes with Scott, letting them meet and connect, letting him know that he doesn’t have to be so combative, that Isaac isn’t asking him to do what they both know he can’t. “I’m not asking you not to go. I’m just saying... you’re not going *alone*.”

It was one of Monroe’s only stipulations. She agreed to meet alone in the tunnels, but Isaac isn’t having that. He doesn’t care that they have to try to make peace with her, that going against one of the only things she asked for will immediately start them off on the wrong foot. They can come back from a bad first impression, but they can’t come back from a trap, not if it gets Scott killed – the way it got Brett and Lori murdered.

“Scott,” Isaac says gently, finding his hand again and holding it with care. “We just talked about this last night. We’re *stronger* if we’re together. You can’t face these things on your own, okay? It’s not just on your shoulders.”

Scott seems to deflate under the careful watch of Isaac’s eyes and the kind strokes of his thumb. His shoulders lose their tightness and he sighs like he hasn’t taken a breath in days.

“Okay,” Scott says. “Okay, you can come, but you have to stay out of sight and no one else is coming.”

Isaac gives a nod of agreement, but, when Scott turns his back to grab something off his bedside table, he shoots off a quick text to the others, to Stiles, Derek, Lydia, and Malia, saying: **Secretly follow us into the tunnels and bring whatever backup is necessary.**

Isaac no longer cares about going against Scott’s instruction. He’s not going to let him get hurt again. He can handle his disappointment but he can’t handle losing him. It’s just not an option. Isaac is going to do whatever it takes to keep him safe.

—

They stand on the edge of the tunnel entrance, one last chance to change their minds, one last chance to turn back unharmed.

Isaac knows that isn't going to happen though. He knows they're going through with this despite all better judgment. Because Brett and Lori are dead and they'll only be the first of many if this continues. Because they can't give up without a fight. Because they don't have any other choice.

"Okay," Scott says. He exhales a breath and looks over at Isaac. "Stay out of sight and wait for my signal, yeah?"

Isaac nods, but doesn't let Scott descend into the tunnel yet. First, he grabs his wrist and tugs him closer. He wraps his arms around Scott, hugging him close and planting a chaste kiss to the crook of his neck.

"Be careful," he whispers.

Scott breaks the embrace enough to meet Isaac's eyes. At this distance, their height difference is stark and defined. Isaac has to look down to lock with brown eyes. It makes Scott feel like a delicate thing, even though he isn't. Isaac knows Scott is as strong, if not stronger than him, but, like this, his instincts surge towards protection.

"Tell me you're going to be okay," Isaac says softly.

Scott shakes his head. "That's just tempting fate, sweetheart."

Isaac laughs and sighs, gently pushing Scott away before he can overthink this any further, before he can lose his nerve in taking the plunge.

"Go," he whispers.

And Scott does. He turns away from Isaac and climbs down through the grate and past the ladder, meeting the stone floor of the tunnel. Isaac follows quickly after.

For a moment, they stand in the darkness. They can't afford to make much noise now, not when they know Monroe could be nearby. So, they give each other a look. Through the dark, their eyes connect and Scott gives a nod.

Isaac returns it and then they split up. Scott goes one way toward the

summit while Isaac loops around in the other direction, keeping himself from being spotted by Monroe and giving him the element of surprise in case he needs it.

Isaac walks the distance to the second grate and the meeting spot of the rest of the pack, keeping his footsteps light and careful in the easily echoing space of the tunnels. It's a clever location for a peace summit, especially considering Monroe's only condition was to meet alone. In the sonorous acoustic tunnels, it will be difficult for either side to pull a fast one.

But... they're still going to try anyway.

Isaac finds Malia and Lydia already waiting for him and Derek climbing down the last few rungs of the ladder. Isaac peers up through the grate to the surface, but he doesn't see anyone else coming.

Isaac risks the whisper of, "Where's Stiles?"

"Getting backup," Lydia says, just as soft and quiet.

Isaac doesn't ask anymore questions because they don't have the safety for it. One question was all he could give away. Now, he can only trust that Stiles knows what he's doing, that he's chosen the right backup to get. Instead of speaking, Isaac gives a tilt of his chin, a move of confirmation.

Then, they travel silently through the tunnels, snaking in towards the heart of the space and the designated peace summit holding area.

As they get closer, Malia, Lydia, and Derek slow down. They stop at the final corner, out of sight from both the hunters and Scott, but close enough that they can eavesdrop and act quickly. This is where they'll wait for the sound of fighting or an alarming enough opening. This is where they'll wait to make their move.

Meanwhile, Isaac stops just long enough to make eye contact with Derek. Neither one says a word. There's no goodbye, there's just their eyes locking in the dark, and then Isaac turns and continues on his own.

He rounds the corner and comes into a short section of tunnel. Here, he can't see much at all, but he can hear the faint rustling of movement.

He hears Scott before he sees him. He hears the quietly wet sound of

his feet hitting the floor and his voice saying, "I thought we were here to talk peace."

Scott walks through the tunnel, coming to a stop right next to Isaac's opening. He stops where Isaac can see him, but, still, he doesn't look his way. He knows Isaac is there, but he keeps his attention firmly forward.

There's a moment of silence where Isaac can only guess what Scott's looking at, can only imagine the threat splayed out before him.

"I agreed to come," a voice carries down the tunnel and to Isaac's ears. There's a condescending note to her tone, something patronizing and cocky. *"I never agreed on peace."*

Isaac hears the crackle of electricity and sees a man armed with a stun gun, sees him closing in behind Scott and blocking him in. And, in that moment, Isaac no longer cares for Scott's signal. (Of course, he gets it anyway – a sideways glance in his direction and eyes widened too far to be anything but a cry for help.)

Isaac doesn't say a word as he steps out of his concealment and up to Scott's side. He keeps his eyes forward too, pays no mind to the spark of power behind them, even as the hairs on the back of his neck stand up in alarm.

Isaac focuses only on the line of tunnel stretching out in front of them – at the woman at the very end. He knows immediately that this is Monroe, but she doesn't look very menacing. If anything, she's shockingly *normal*.

What's more worrisome to Isaac are the twin gunmen flanking her sides and the figure stepping out of the shadows.

"Well, well, well," he taunts in that grating, aged voice. *"Isaac Lahey,"* he hisses his name like it's made of poison on his tongue. "I see you've been upgraded from a pawn."

Gerard steps up past Monroe, collecting her as he goes, the pair striding closer to bridge the gap. The distance between the two sides diminishes down to mere inches, just a breath of air keeping them from an attack.

Isaac can feel Gerard sizing him up, but he doesn't waver and he doesn't flinch. He stays completely neutral, shows his contempt only in a curling of his lip. He lets Gerard's eyes roam over him, lets him

taunt with, “We really should have killed you when we had the chance.”

Monroe makes a soft sound like a scoff and, easily evil, she says, “We might get another one.”

Isaac still doesn’t react, but Scott does. A growl bubbles low in his chest, but he’s quick to tamp down on it, quick to try to hide his emotions. (Now, Isaac has to do the same, has to bury the urge to reach out and comfort.) But, of course, it’s too late to mend the damage. The noise of opposition was heard and now Monroe is smirking and Gerard has that twisted glint in his eyes.

Still, Scott doesn’t let the momentary slip get the better of him. He looks right at Monroe and says, “Whatever he’s told you, there’s another side of the story.”

“Isn’t there always?” Monroe questions. Isaac lets himself drink in her appearance, the scratch across her neck and the smugness in her eyes. She’s small in stature, but she stands tall in her confidence – resolute, almost.

“What were you hoping for here, Scott?” Gerard asks. His eyes are narrowed and assessing, his voice cool and calm.

“I was hoping to talk to someone reasonable,” Scott says, giving a nonchalant jab and a quiet distaste. He keeps his eyes mostly on Monroe, says, “Trust me, he’s not the kind of person that you want to follow. He’s going to lead you off a cliff.”

“Following me?” Gerard says quickly. He looks around at the tunnel, “No one here is following me, Scott. I’m merely an *advisor*.”

And that’s the twist of the knife they weren’t ready for, that’s the fork in the road that’s going to cost them.

Isaac sees the shock pass over Scott’s face, sees him recalculating, but it’s already too late. They’ve already gotten themselves in too deep, too far into the tunnels and the heart of a plan so poorly constructed.

This is more than just a trap.

Scott’s eyes fall on Monroe. There’s a darkness hidden in the depths of brown irises, a disapproval that runs bone deep. In a matter of seconds, their perspective of her shifts. She’s no longer a figure of reason, no longer an amateur or an innocent or someone who can be

saved.

"This is because of you?" Scott guesses.

"That's right," Monroe says, still with that air of arrogance. Something about the way she talks sets Isaac's nerves on fire, makes anger bloom in his stomach. "You're negotiating with *me*, Scott."

And Monroe hasn't looked at Isaac once. From the moment he's stepped inside the tunnel, she's kept her sights set on Scott and no one else. She hasn't even paid a glance towards Gerard. There's a subtlety to the kind of power she wields, something Isaac didn't see it at first, but it's obvious now. She's calling the shots here, she holds all the cards.

"Okay," Scott says. He sighs and shakes his head, mouth parting with a quiet click. "Tell me how to settle this. What do you want?"

Monroe looks down for half a second, and then back up. She says, "I want to see a werewolf beg for peace."

"Fine," Scott shrugs, agreeing easy as anything, a touch of desperation to it. "Okay, I'll beg. I'll – I'll do whatever you want. Just tell me," his voice goes serious and slow, "that we don't have to kill each other. That we can find a way to make peace."

Monroe's lips morph into a momentary frown, something fakely disappointed and unsatisfied. Isaac watches her closely, watches the smooth ripple of her brows and the faux sadness in, "That wasn't quite what I was hoping for."

Scott keeps going despite the infuriating facade of Monroe. He keeps a level head and a stern focus, doesn't stoop to the bait and stays diplomatic with, "People are dying."

"They've *been* dying," Monroe says. "You only care now because it's *your* people."

She says it as if they aren't already aware, as if the weight of all that's lost isn't already crushing them, as if Scott doesn't already blame himself for every misstep and every tragedy.

"You have to want something other than seeing us all dead," Scott says. It's pleading, but only faintly. He's standing his ground while he still can, not quite ready to properly beg yet. He shakes his head, eyebrows lifting with an idea. "What if we leave Beacon Hills? All of

us.”

And it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world if they could get away that easily, but Isaac knows it won't be as simple as that, knows it even before Monroe counters with, “If you leave, we'll follow you. We'll hunt you down until every single one of you is gone.”

“Some of us have actually been protecting *you*,” Scott says, all but ignoring the very obvious threat of *genocide*.

“Don't listen to him,” Gerard says. He doesn't move and he doesn't involve himself any more than a figure on the sideline, just says, “He *wants* you to be afraid.”

It strikes as Isaac as odd that Gerard – an enemy known for his ego and his longing for recognition – would take such a backseat role in all of this. It makes him wonder what they're missing, makes him question what dynamics are hidden beneath the surface. It makes him *nervous*.

“But you shouldn't be afraid of us,” Scott says. “We protect people,” he tilts his chin to make eye contact, “people like you.”

“People like me?” Monroe repeats. And, for the first time in the exchange, there's a touch of emotion to her voice. It's something exasperated and disbelieving, something almost offended by the claim. “You don't know *anything* about people like me.”

“So help me understand,” Scott says. There's a rising intensity to his tone now too. “Tell me what made you hate us so much.”

“I don't think you want to press that button, Scott,” Gerard says.

And Isaac *loathes* to agree with him, but he might have a point. It feels like they're encroaching on dangerous territory here, something unknown and unexpected. It feels like they're stepping into another trap.

But...

The more information they get out of this meeting, the better off they'll be. So, even if it's unsavory, even if it's difficult to digest, they might *need* to hear this.

“Something happened to you, didn't it?” Scott says. He's so good at this, so good at the slightest shifting of his tone and the adapting to

every turn in the conversation. His social skills are *impeccable* in this moment and Isaac can't help but be impressed as he stands silent, only a witness to this moment, only a little extra muscle in the event that those guns start firing. "Something bad?"

"Bad doesn't even come *close*," Monroe says, practically spits. Her eyes go haunted with a resurfacing memory, her voice breathy with the retelling of, "There was a faculty meeting that ran late one night. We were complaining about the new course rubric. I thought that was the worst thing I'd have to deal with that year. I was wrong."

Isaac listens to the story, tries to find a neutral perspective somewhere between wary and sympathetic.

"We all heard it," Monroe continues. "This... *sound* coming out of the shadows. 'Probably an animal,' they said. But not like anything I'd ever heard." Her eyes are a little glassy and her voice trembles, but it's forced, almost practiced. (It reminds Isaac of Theo in a horrible sort of way.) "When it moved, it moved faster than anything I'd ever seen."

This is a performance, not just for Scott and Isaac, but for the other hunters in the tunnels with them.

And it might work on Scott, might work on the guard dogs, but it won't work on Isaac. One tragedy doesn't give you the right to kill people, doesn't give you the right to turn into the monster you're running from.

"I saw teeth and claws... fangs," Monroe lists. The emotion drains from her voice, turning hollow with, "And then there was blood everywhere. I couldn't believe I was still alive." She shakes her head, "I pulled my *dead friend's body* over mine and just *laid* there *terrified*."

Monroe clenches her jaw and stares at Scott with contempt.

"If one of us had been there," he starts, but it's the wrong thing to say.

"You were there, Scott," Monroe says, each word punctuated with putrid anger and disgust – *hatred*. "You both were," her eyes cut to Isaac for the first time, then quickly back to Scott. "You and the deputy. Don't you remember?"

Isaac recognizes the story now, realizes what night she's talking about. The Beast of Beacon Hills and the hellhound, the school bus full of bodies and the way they all just stood there.

“Did you even *think* to check if anyone was still alive?” Monroe tests.

Scott blinks slowly. Isaac can sense the shift in his chemosignals, can taste the self-hatred and the regret. “I didn’t know,” he whispers, and, now, it’s like he’s begging not to be spared, but to be believed.

“You didn’t *care*,” Monroe argues.

That’s almost enough to make Isaac lash out. He has to bury his hands into fists, has to slam his nails into the skin of his palms. And he knows the movement will be noticed by Gerard. He knows he’s revealing too much here, knows he’s giving too much of himself away, but he doesn’t have any other option. If he doesn’t do this, then he’s going to lunge and leave more than just a scratch along her throat.

Because how *dare* she say Scott doesn’t care. All he does is care. All he does is give himself away, give his *life* away for others. All he does is care and she has the audacity to doubt that? To make him out to be the villain when he’s only ever been the hero?

It’s too much for Isaac to hear, too much for him to bear, but he holds on anyway, holds tight with his fists squeezed at his sides.

“How many people had to *die* so you could keep your secret? So you and your *friends* could carry on as if *nothing* ever happened,” Monroe barks. She sucks in a shuddering breath and, “I was there, lying under those bodies, hiding and waiting for someone to *finally* find me. And when someone did, it wasn’t you *protecting* me.” Her tone goes nasty and her expression distorts in repulsion. “It was the *sheriff*.”

Monroe tilts her head in an upward incline, an obvious show of superiority. She’s looking down at Scott even without the height to do so, she’s glaring and hateful and harsh.

“You should have brought more than just one measly beta,” she says.

Monroe reaches for her gun and Scott holds out a placating hand to try to stop her, but it doesn’t matter.

There’s a ramming of a body against the back of the tunnel, the stun gun armed soldier crashing down as Malia steps out with a call of, “He did, actually.”

She stomps out into the tunnel, followed quickly by Lydia and Derek. Isaac watches them for only a moment, takes in only the strong set of their jaws and the power behind their eyes. He reassures himself in

their presence and turns back to Monroe, watches a small flicker of doubt shine in her irises.

Then, Monroe cocks her gun and the others follow. Now, there's four hunters standing face-to-face with five overpowered supernaturals. Isaac knows who's going to win this fight, but he still doesn't feel good about it, still feels a simmer of something *wrong* in his stomach.

"Hey, hey, hey," Scott says quickly, staring at Monroe from under dropped down eyebrows. "We did *not* come here to fight."

"Well then you came here to die," Gerard rasps, a grumbling outburst of pure evil.

Isaac, honest to god, almost laughs. He doesn't, if only because of the tension in the tunnel bringing silence to his vocal chords. But, *seriously?*

Malia doesn't have the same reaction. She doesn't find the humor in the ridiculous threat. Instead, she growls with bared teeth and glowing blue eyes. Scott sticks a hasty and blocking arm out in front of her, but she doesn't make any charges towards attack, just snaps, "We're trying to protect you!"

"You might want to control your beta, Scott," Gerard says. He looks down at the guns, threatens, "She could get you all killed."

The overconfidence is a little bit comical too. They're standing off against a true alpha, two betas, a werecoyote, and a banshee. The hunters might be able to do some damage, might be able to make a few lucky shots, but none of them are dying right now. Isaac feels secure in that, feels strong in his backup plan and the backup behind him.

"We're *not* the enemy," Lydia says, trying her best to salvage the situation, to find logic and shared ground. "There's something else going on. We don't know what it is, but we promise you: there's a bigger problem here."

"Something worse than supernatural cannibals?" Monroe questions.

Scott gives a confused tilt of his head, mostly just because wendigos are the least of their troubles. Or, maybe, it's the fact that Donovan was a made wendigo. Maybe Scott senses something taunting in those words, something calculated and pointed, something made to hurt him more than demonstrate knowledge.

"Yeah," Monroe says, bolstered by the reaction, "I know everything now." Her voice shifts into an over-enunciated, gritted out list of, "Wendigos, oni, werecoyotes. People being murdered as human sacrifices?"

"We *tried* to stop those," Scott says. And he's still not yelling back, he's still not dropping down to Monroe's level, to the easy tug of argument.

"And how many people lost their lives while you were *trying*?" Monroe shouts.

"Too many."

"It was *twelve*."

"It was fourteen, actually," Isaac says, speaking up for the first time since stepping into the tunnel. Because she's the one in dangerous territory now. She's the one who doesn't know what she's saying, doesn't know what boundaries she's crossing. He looks Monroe dead in the eye and says, "We've lost people too."

They lost Erica and Boyd to the chaos of human sacrifices and the reign of Jennifer Blake. They lost Allison and Aiden to the oni and the nogitsune. They lost an entire list of people to dead pools and The Benefactor. They lost a dozen chimeras to Theo and the Dread Doctors. They lost Stiles to the Wild Hunt. And, now, they've lost Brett and Lori to the hunters and to Monroe.

They've lost more than Monroe would even be able to comprehend. They've lost more than she's willing to understand. Because *she's* the one that doesn't care. *She's* the one that's been blinded by power and the thrill of not being afraid anymore.

And Isaac gets that. He gets how it feels to have a strength thrumming in your veins for the very first time. He gets how easy it is to be swept up in that image, in making sure everyone *knows* that you won't be cornered any longer.

But Isaac's never killed anyone and neither has Scott. They've never let that evil corrupt them because they're *stronger* than that. To be evil is to be *weak*. Because true power comes from kindness and compassion and the willingness to throw yourself in front of a bullet to save a stranger.

Real power comes from stepping back and letting go and knowing

when to hold back.

“Like the death of *my* granddaughter?” Gerard speaks because he has no idea when he’s crossed a line, because he has no idea how to let power pass him by. He says it like he holds some claim to Allison because they share a last name, like he didn’t kill her mother and destroy her family, like she didn’t *hate* him.

Isaac snarls, can’t help it, feels fury wash up inside him.

But then, there’s a hand on his wrist. And it’s not Scott. It’s the delicate grip of Lydia Martin, the pastel paint of her nails and the tight calm of her voice saying, “It’s amplifying their fear.”

Scott looks back at her for a split second, but quickly casts his eyes back to Monroe. He’s holding two hands out in front of him now, posing no threat of attack and no reason to start shooting.

“You’ve all lost somebody and you want revenge, I get that,” he says. “But just listen to me: something escaped the Wild Hunt—”

“Scott!” Lydia yells, unable to hold it in any longer, unable to wait for the end of his final appeal. “Scott, it’s here right now!”

“What?” Scott asks, but, by then, it’s too late.

In a matter of seconds, things go from hostile but composed, to reckless and chaotic. Like the wind changing directions, mayhem blows through the tunnel and pandemonium erupts.

The hunters start shooting, aiming wild and nonsensically. There’s no reason in any of them now. Now, it’s a whirl of terror and the sound of gunfire and bullet after bullet raining down on them.

In an instant, Scott is yelling, “Get down!”

And then, Lydia uses her hold on Isaac’s wrist to tug him towards the wall of the tunnel, crouching to the ground and bringing him with her, bodies shielded from harm only by luck and fear as the hunters shoot without rhyme or reason.

Derek comes down next to Isaac, watching as the scene unfolds before them. He pants and shakes his head, “That thing’s making them panic.”

Isaac knows he’s right. The hunters might have been ready to shoot at

the drop of a hat, at a single signal from Monroe, but she's on the floor of the tunnel too, yelling at them to *stop*.

She's not in control anymore. Now, their lives are in the hands of a faceless corpse. Isaac can see it at the end of the tunnel, standing there blank and obviously expressionless.

Malia sees it too.

She jumps up to her feet and lunges at the faceless creature, but, as her claws swing out, it disappears and fades out of sight. Malia can't make contact with the body, can't do anything to douse the wildfire spread of horror, the epidemic of terror.

It's a strange sort of fright. It feels more like anticipation than anything else, like apprehension. It feels like that first moment when the sword hits and blood pours free. That first moment when the shock sets in and you don't know what's going to happen. It feels like that first breath when your mind hasn't quite caught up yet, but your body *instinctively* knows that something is wrong, that this isn't going to end well. It feels like that first moment between disaster and realization.

It feels like Isaac is waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the freezer lid to slam closed.

Isaac doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know how to move, he doesn't know how to fight back.

But, fortunately, he doesn't have to.

A flare drops into the tunnel, followed shortly by the crouching form of Parrish. And then, coming down the ladder with a little less *flare* is Stiles.

Backup.

Isaac only watches as Parrish tears his way through the wayward hunters, past Monroe, and right up to the faceless corpse. He grabs it by the neck, making sure and obvious contact.

Parrish holds out the flare, starts to yell, and then slams the flame into his skin. It catches on his deputy uniform and ignites quickly from there, engulfing his body in lapping orange tongues of heat.

Then, Isaac feels another tug on his wrist. This time, it actually is

Scott. And, together, they duck into the nearest side branch of tunnels, escaping from the spreading fever of flame as Parrish and the faceless corpse erupt in a wall of blazing fire.

It all happens so fast.

The flame is there, and then it isn't. The lights of the tunnel flicker as the dust settles, casting shadows over the silhouette of Parrish, the way he presses up from the ground as fully human.

Derek reaches out to steady Parrish, helping him stabilize in his footing as he pants for every breath. Parrish's skin is charred and charcoal dusted, but it's nothing compared to the faceless corpse. The body is singed completely black, looking entirely decimated – though, Isaac doesn't have the optimism to suspect that means anything, to think that this is over so quickly.

Just like the flame, the hunters are there, and then they aren't. The only evidence of them ever being here are the countless bullet casings lining the floor.

Still, Scott looks around. His demeanor is downtrodden and defeated, so obviously feeling the failure of this peace summit.

"They didn't come here to negotiate," Isaac says. Because that much is obvious now. As much as they wanted it to be, peace was never on the table. This was a meeting of announcement, a declaration of Monroe's power and the end goal. There was never any chance at reconciliation. "You did everything you could."

Scott shakes his head, looks past Isaac's eyes down towards his lips. "No, not everything," he says. "Not yet."

And, for the life of him, Isaac can't discern what that's supposed to mean.

—

The drive back to the McCall household is mostly quiet, but not necessarily awkward or tense. There's just a lot to take in, just a lot of information to make sense of from the peace summit gone wrong.

Isaac doesn't have Scott's optimism, but he's trying to remain hopeful. He's trying to tell himself that, even though they didn't get what they came for, they did get a chance to stake out the other side. They might not have gotten peace, but they got information. And, if they can

analyze the right pieces, if they can dissect the story, they might be able to find a way to win.

Though, really, right now, Isaac doesn't know what it is to win this fight. This isn't a mindless creature, this is a human being turned dark by circumstance. Isaac doesn't know how they go up against an enemy like that, how they *stop* a villain that's not a monster but a person.

"Hey," Scott says, just when Isaac's thoughts are starting to stray too far into *pointless, helpless, unfixable*. Scott interrupts just when things are getting too bleak, brings some sunshine to Isaac's mind with, "Um. Thanks. For, y'know, telling the others and not listening to me."

Isaac breathes a laugh, and says, "Yeah. Anytime."

Scott smiles back at him, weak and hushed in their little corner of the world.

—

They enter through the backdoor of the McCall house, stepping into the once more dark and quiet space. Though, unlike the night before, this time, Scott does flip on the light, illuminating the room and the stranger standing in the kitchen.

Isaac's heart gives a slight jump at the sight, at her damp hair and her tired eyes and the blood oozing from her temple.

"Scott," she exhales when she sees him, a tear falling over her cheek. "Scott McCall."

Her eyes go heavy lidded and, in an instant, Scott is rushing forward to catch her with a call of, "Wait. Hey, hey. Sit down."

Scott guides the girl back to a seat, into a chair at the kitchen table. She stumbles slightly with the movement. She's woozy, obviously from a loss of blood. Her gaze is hazy and she looks like she's spinning in place, like her mind is swirling as consciousness slips through her fingers.

"She's a werewolf," Scott says, speaking mostly to Stiles and Lydia, to the ones who wouldn't know it right away, who can't recognize the creature by scent alone.

"Who did this to you?" Malia asks, soft spoken like she rarely is. She takes a few steps to close the distance between her and the stranger,

body dipping low to try to meet her eyes with, “A hunter?”

The girl looks up at Malia. She gives a small shake of her head, eyes falling back down to her lap as she says, “A deputy.”

“They’ve got a deputy?” Stiles questions, voice thick with incredulous bewilderment.

And, in that statement, it becomes so clear. There’s no stopping this train now, no diverting it, no changing its direction. Whatever’s happening, it’s already in motion. They’re too late.

They’ve got everyone.

Pressure Test

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 15

Word count: 10,763

Warning: suicide

Stilinski drops the folder onto his desk with a quiet thump, displaying two images of two teenagers – a blond girl and an Asian boy, both young and likely still in high school. He says without stalling, “I’m not letting them out.”

Isaac sees Scott’s expression warp with shock as he turns his body, looking towards the pack in quiet alarm. Though, as the sheriff keeps talking, he pivots back just as quickly, listening to every word with steadfast attention.

“We’ve got two bodies covered in slash marks,” Stilinski says. “They *confessed* to killing two people.”

“*Hunters*,” Scott stresses.

“People, Scott,” Stilinski corrects. His eyes flick to Stiles for just a moment. Then, “Self-defense or not, they’re still here and the other guys are dead. There’s a process I have to follow.”

“Yeah, but you know what’s happening around here,” Scott says, leaning forward, trying to appeal to Stilinski’s sympathy. He dips his head, a little indignant, “It’s not *safe* for them.”

“*This* may actually be the safest place for them in Beacon Hills,” Stilinski counters, voice raising as he looks around the sheriff’s station. And, “At least I can protect them here.”

“Dad,” Stiles says, gentle as he levels him with disapproval. “I know you think that, but it’s just not true anymore. One of the deputies is already working for Gerard. Who knows how long we have until more cross over.”

Stilinski folds his arms over his chest. He looks up at the ceiling then back down at his son. He sighs and says, “I’m just not buying that. I know these deputies like the back of my hand. I know their families,

their kids, their brothers and sisters. I know who they are and I *trust* them.”

“You know who they *were*,” Liam says, bravely speaking up against the tone of authority. Isaac is a little impressed by it. “There’s something out there. *Everyone’s* afraid and it’s getting worse.”

“We can’t protect two werewolves from hunters if they’re already on the inside,” Scott continues, still standing his ground. He’s forcing contact, like if he can make Stilinski see eye to eye literally, then it will work in the figurative sense too.

Stilinski looks at Scott and then around at the others. His small office is a little crowded with bodies – nobody feels comfortable splitting up right now. Stilinski doesn’t say anything right away, just lets his focus trail as his thoughts piece together and connect.

In the end, he looks past the group to the leather sofa in the corner and the slightly more stabilized girl sitting at the edge of it. He asks, “It’s Quinn, right?”

On cue, they all turn around to look at her. She looks tired, but the blood has been cleaned from her temple and her blue eyes are less hazy than before. She gives a silent nod.

Stilinski presses, “You’re *sure* it was a deputy who shot you?” And, eyes narrowed and intensity in his tone, “Absolutely, one hundred percent sure?”

Quinn merely nods again.

—

“I saw flashing lights. A police car. I saw a badge, a gun. And then they *shot* me,” Quinn lists. She sounds a little hostile, but Isaac thinks it’s just the fear that’s settled in her. Isaac knows what that’s like. He knows how it feels to see the police and expect to be helped and believed, but instead to be turned away or doubted. He knows what kind of mistrust that sews. Quinn looks up at Stilinski, unafraid to meet his eyes even as her voice shakes a little, “They shot me in the *head* and that’s all that I remember.”

Stilinski sighs, palms pressed into his desk as he leans forward and then pushes away, coming to a full stand as he looks away from Quinn and over to Scott. Still not quite convinced, he says, “There’s a couple holes in her story.”

“Maybe because there’s a hole in her head,” Lydia says quickly.

Malia laughs and that almost gets Isaac going. It’s so completely unfiltered, so unabashed and inappropriate. The only reason Isaac doesn’t fall in after her is because of the heavy stares she brings, all unimpressed and unamused.

And, hands clasped in front of her and head tipping down, Malia gives a sheepish and somewhat forced, “I’m sorry.”

“Sheriff,” Scott says, moving past the outburst to something more genuine and serious. He steps closer to the desk, says, “We need to get Jiang and Tierney *out* of here before anyone realizes that they’re here.”

“And take them *where?*” Stilinski questions. His volume shoots up again, protesting with, “I can’t let them go.”

“But if you keep them here, they’re—”

Stilinski cuts Lydia off, barreling ahead and continuing, “Look. If there’s a problem—”

Stilinski gets interrupted too. This time, by a noise almost like an explosion and a blinding light suddenly pouring through the windows. It’s bright and white and Isaac doesn’t have to look outside to know who it is.

Monroe.

Stilinski is quick to burst through the door of his office, calling for his deputies to, “Get away from the windows!” And, “Put those guns away!”

Isaac stands with Scott and Stiles in the doorway of the office, watching as the deputies do as they’re told. Isaac is inspecting and cautious, knowing that somebody here could be the deputy that shot Quinn. And, while Isaac’s pretty sure they won’t act now, in such a visible and crowded space, he doesn’t see the harm in being a little extra careful anyway, in keeping an eye out regardless.

“I’m guessing you know who’s out there,” Parrish says, whispered almost like a question.

Stilinski looks over at him, gives a conceding tilt of his head and a gruff, “I got a pretty good idea.”

“They’ll be armed to the teeth,” Parrish warns him.

Stilinski unholsters his own gun, placing it on the nearest flat surface and saying, “Which is why I won’t be.”

“Dad,” Stiles says, rushing to step out from under the doorframe and into the open space. There’s a protest in his voice, something tight and panicked, something like a kid who has already lost one parent and doesn’t want to lose another.

“Stiles,” Stilinski says back. He gives a shake of his head and holds out an open palm, like he’s trying to press Stiles back into the office, trying to force him to a stop.

And that’s never worked with Stiles before, he’s never been cowed or controlled, but he doesn’t move any closer. Isaac can smell the anxiety radiating off of him, can almost feel the thick waves of it ghosting over his skin.

Isaac reaches out to Stiles, puts a hopefully comforting hand on his shoulder.

“I’m going with you,” Parrish says, reaching to remove his own gun.

“No,” Stilinski says easily and sternly, leaving no room for argument. He takes a step closer to Parrish, speaking quietly, “You’re gonna get some deputies, check the exits, and *hope* we’re not completely surrounded.” Then, he dips forward and even softer, “And keep an eye out? Let’s make sure we’re all on the same side here.”

Parrish’s eyebrows drop and he looks around the station, eyes skirting over the other deputies and the potential betrayers.

Stilinski spares one last glance at Stiles, one last reassuring and wry smile. Then, he turns and walks out the door with his hands held up, not in surrender, but in peace.

—

Scott turns to enter back into Stilinski’s office. Isaac makes to follow him, but, as he pivots, he sees a figure standing by the information desk. He’s pressed against the counter, like he’s trying to bleed into the background, like he’s trying to go unnoticed.

But it’s too late. Isaac has noticed.

He catches Stiles' forearm, pulling him to a halt and stopping him from rejoining the group. He hisses a whisper of, "What the hell is Theo doing here?"

Stiles' expression contorts in an alarmed sort of confusion. He looks past Isaac and over to the spot where Theo is still standing. Theo looks back at them with forced nonchalance, as if he's meant to be here, as if there's nothing out of the ordinary in his presence.

Stiles pulls his arm free from Isaac's hold and gives a casual sort of shrug, not looking as bothered by the development as Isaac thinks he should. "You'd have to ask my dad," Stiles says. "They made some sort of deal with him. I don't know the details." He shrugs again, "Maybe Parrish does."

For a moment, Isaac just stands there next to Stiles, staring at the indifferent outline of Theo. There's a feeling simmering low in Isaac's stomach, something like dread but deeper – *worse*. It's a thrumming of morbid curiosity laced with something nasty and protective, it's the kind of feeling that Isaac can't quite ignore.

And so, he stands there staring at Theo until he sees movement in the corner of his eye, until he spots Parrish at one of the windows. And, taking the pseudo-advice from Stiles, he leaves his side to go investigate.

Isaac tries not to be too intense about it, just sidles up next to Parrish and shares in his observation of the conversation outside. Isaac can't make out any voices and he can only see the back of Stilinski's head, but he can see the slew of cars and the dozens of armed hunters.

The building is completely surrounded.

It comes on quickly after that. Isaac doesn't manage to say a single word to Parrish. Instead, he gets one good look out the window and then panic is blossoming in his lungs. He feels like the room is spinning and collapsing all at once, a mix of constant motion that makes him unsteady on his feet, makes his stomach churn with nausea and unrest.

Isaac feels dizzy. His vision blurs out at the edges, going black and dark and terrifying. It's the closing lid of the freezer, the engulfing of darkness and the removal of all light and hope. It's a suffocating sort of sensation, the kind that makes Isaac feel like he's either going to wolf out or pass out.

“Isaac,” a voice says.

He turns on his heel, coming face to face with Stiles. Isaac’s eyes flicker between gold light and the dim warmth of the police station, painting Stiles in yellow and white. It’s a back and forth fluctuation of control.

Isaac is slipping out of focus, out of mind.

“Isaac,” Stiles repeats. “You need to breathe.”

Isaac can’t, is the thing. The room is big, but it’s crowded and the building is surrounded by enemies. They’re trapped and Isaac *can’t* breathe. He can’t think past the guns and the walls and the fear tied tight around his throat.

“Okay,” Stiles says quickly. He snags Isaac’s arm, and he wants to tug and break free, but he doesn’t have the consciousness for it. He can only gasp for air as Stiles guides him out of the over populated front room and down a hallway.

Distantly, Isaac hears Stiles calling out for Scott or Derek, but it’s a far away thing. Isaac is more focused on the choking sensation, the burning of his lungs, the grains of sand in his windpipe.

Stiles ushers Isaac to a back room, snapping for the only deputy there to, “*Get out.*” And then, gentle as he can manage, he turns on Isaac, hands on his shoulders and rooting him in place. Isaac can see the light brown of his eyes, the melted warmth and care there, but it feels distant too. It’s like he’s looking at Stiles through a pane of glass, through a pane of panic.

Isaac sways on his feet and Stiles lowers them to the floor. He’s careful with Isaac, careful with bringing him to his knees, careful with his words of, “Isaac. It’s okay. You’re not trapped. Okay, bud? Just look at all the space in this room. You’re fine.”

Isaac doesn’t look around. He doesn’t want to see the corners or the clutter of furniture or the dust coating underutilized surfaces. He doesn’t want to see any of it. He focuses only on Stiles’ face, tries to ground himself in the familiarity of it. Stiles is his best friend and Isaac won’t hurt him.

But then... why does Stiles look so scared?

“Isaac,” Stiles keeps saying his name, like he’s desperate, like he’s

begging. “You’re okay. You’re nowhere near the freezer. Your dad is dead, remember?”

Isaac’s not sure where the words come from, didn’t even know he could still speak until, “Yeah, that hardly matters in Beacon Hills.”

Stiles’ eyes sharpen with shock and then a small laugh bubbles up in his throat. He looks like he regrets it, like he wants to tamp down on the sound. But he’s smiling and that helps, if only a little.

Stiles concedes, “Yeah, okay, maybe you’re right. But he’s not here right now. It’s just us, okay? It’s just me.”

Isaac gives a small nod. There are still thorns around his edges, piercing into his heart and his chest, but there’s roses blooming too. He feels torn in two directions, caught between terror and amusement, unable to choose one or the other.

“I need you to breathe, okay?” Stiles says. “I don’t know how long werewolves can hold their breath, but I swear you haven’t inhaled in at least sixty seconds, so just. Come on, Isaac.”

Isaac tries. It shudders and burns on the way down. It hurts because it brings clarity and with clarity comes understanding and pain. Isaac’s pretty sure he’s crying, pretty sure he can feel wetness on his cheeks.

He knows he’s freaking out, but he doesn’t understand why. He sees the trigger, but it shouldn’t have been enough to set him off like this. And yet, Isaac’s claws are digging into his knees and his tongue is made of sandpaper and his throat is so dry he wants to rip it out or scream or both.

Isaac isn’t going to kill Stiles, he knows that much. He’s gotten enough of his control back to feel safe kneeling on the hard floor with him, but he’s not okay and he’s not *breathing* right and–

Derek slides in front of Isaac, taking over with a big hand on his shoulder and a quiet, “Isaac?”

He nods again, but doesn’t speak. His throat is constricting and all he can really give is an embarrassing sort of squeak. Isaac kind of wants to bury himself in Derek’s chest, wants to crawl inside his comfort and disappear forever, wants to bind himself in the small space like a torture of his own design.

He doesn’t move. He only nods.

“You’re not trapped,” Derek says. “We’re just going to stay here for a little bit. We’ve decided that, yeah? It’s our decision. Got nothing to do with the hunters, yeah?”

Isaac doesn’t react. He stares at the green of Derek’s eyes and lets a certain numbness crawl down his spine and through his limbs.

“Can you take a breath with me? Just one and then you’ll be fixed right up.”

Isaac knows what Derek’s doing. He’s present enough to know that this is some sort of mental trick, some sort of placebo. But he’s desperate enough to listen, to follow the pattern of Derek’s steady breathing and try to match it with his own.

It still hurts. It still feels like Isaac is too full, like he’s too big for the confines of his skin and the space of the room. But he gives into it anyway and lets himself breathe, lets himself hurt.

His full vision comes back to him and he sees Stiles sitting in his peripherals, out of the way and not crowding him, but not far off either. He’s close enough that Isaac could reach out and touch, but he doesn’t dare.

“Sorry,” is the first word Isaac speaks when his mouth doesn’t feel so glued together.

Derek exhales a relieved sort of laugh, a smile and a shake of his head. It’s a statement of, *you’re so stupid*. Isaac revels in the normalcy, in the quiet care and affection of teasing without pulling punches, even in the face of panic attacks and bloodied knees.

“Nice going,” Isaac says, turning his head to look at Stiles. “Being alone with a werewolf during a panic attack. Real smart.”

Stiles puffs up his chest, like he’s offended, like he’s preparing some grand protest. Instead, he just lets the air blow out and shrugs, “Well, you didn’t kill me. So.”

He didn’t. And that shouldn’t be a win, shouldn’t even be an option on the table – killing his own best friend – but Isaac is a werewolf and this is his life. He feels a little dismayed by the thought, though probably not as much as he should be.

“I don’t know what happened,” Isaac admits, voice quiet and directed at the red stains of his hands. “I haven’t been triggered like that since I

got in the cooler to bring Stiles back from the Hunt.”

He looks up again, knows there’s an apology and a hint of shame in his eyes, but he doesn’t bother hiding it. There’s no reason when it’s Stiles and Derek in front of him, when his expression could be completely blank and they would still be perceptive enough to read him like a book.

“Wait,” Stiles says, head shaking. “Wait. You – You did *what?*”

Isaac’s eyes widen and he feels some of the color returning his cheeks. He stares down at his hands again, shrugs. He mumbles and repeats, “Got in a cooler to remember you.” (He doesn’t say the word *freezer*, but the implication lies heavy in the already thick air.)

He can feel Stiles staring at him, can imagine the stunned look on his face, but he lets it go unobserved. He can’t quite handle whatever emotion is waiting there for him, whatever conclusion of adoration Stiles has come to.

“You’re insane,” Stiles whispers, but doesn’t force eye contact and doesn’t say anything more.

Derek extends a hand towards Isaac and says, “Can we go back out now?”

Isaac takes the offered support as his answer, lets Derek smear his hand with blood and pull him up to his feet. Then, together, the three of them return to the front room and the building chaos that has mounted since their absence.

Scott is the first one to notice them. His face lights with relief, like he was scared before, but feels nothing but safety now, nothing but comfort in their return. And, “Where the hell did you guys go?”

“Isaac had a panic attack,” Stiles says as if discussing something mundane like the weather.

Derek shoves an overly harsh elbow into his side, grumbling, “Wow. Nice. Very tactful, Stiles.”

Scott ignores them both. The small smile drips off his face, transforming into a frown and palpable *concern*. He takes a step towards Isaac, reaching out with a tentative hand. Isaac lets it fall to his waist, lets Scott rove his eyes over him, lets him whisper soft and semi-private, “Are you okay?”

It's so sincere that it almost aches. And, while Isaac is still feeling a little shaken, while he still feels a little out of balance, the only answer he finds is, "Yeah, 'm okay."

Scott's expression twists into a sad sort of smile, a sympathetic and worried look of unlimited care. It makes Isaac's stomach tighten, makes his heart wobble, but it's overshadowed by the rising volume of conversation around them.

"Are we *really* doing this?" Lydia questions.

Her voice brings Stiles to attention, causing his eyes to squint and bringing a weary askance of, "Doing what?"

"Breaking Jiang and Tierney out and fighting our way through," Liam answers, like that's the most obvious and reasonable thing in the world.

It really isn't.

Stiles must think so too because he quickly says, "Uhh, that's a *horrible* plan."

"My son is right," Stilinski's voice carries over the station, quieting out the background whispering and drawing attention to the group standing before the double doors. He stops them in their tracks and keeps them firmly planted, keeps them from making a mistake that would likely get them all killed.

"I can get through them," Lydia says. And they all know she's not being overconfident or overestimating her abilities. She could get through that crowd of hunters without much more than a sore throat.

But that doesn't mean she *should*.

"We're not going to fire the first shot," Stilinski says. He sighs, almost seeming disappointed, "Now, get back from the door. All of you." And then, with a gesture towards the fugitives, "Parrish, get these two back in their cell."

Deputy Parrish quickly does as instructed. Meanwhile, Scott approaches Stilinski, asking, "What happened?"

Stilinski is unharmed, which is an inarguable bright side to all of this. But his expression is bleak and his demeanor is obviously not very

optimistic. Whatever happened in that meeting outside, it wasn't good.

"She gave us till midnight."

And nobody has to ask what that means. They all already know. Monroe gave them till midnight to hand over Jiang and Tierney.

Isaac helps Scott push a heavy metal desk up against the entrance of the sheriff's station. It scrapes along the ground as they go, making a grating squeaking noise as it tips forward and out of their hold, resting against the glass doors with a teetering sort of balance. Isaac has no hopes of this table actually keeping anyone out, but it's a surface level kind of comfort.

Scott touches the inside of Isaac's wrist, a gentle stroking and a quiet affection. He whispers, "Sorry I didn't notice."

Isaac shakes his head, slides his wrist away so he can lace his fingers with Scott's. He squeezes his hand, saying, "It's okay. Stiles had it under control and you were busy dealing with a freaked out Malia, Liam, and..."

Theo.

Isaac loosens his hold on Scott and, "I'll be right back."

Scott's expression shifts into soft confusion, but he lets Isaac go without protest, turning instead to check on Malia and the others.

Isaac easily spots Parrish and Stilinski, wrapped in conversation with each other on the other side of the room. Isaac doesn't think it through, just crosses the space and joins them without hesitation.

The thing is: Isaac's not sure why he's so bothered. He's not sure why it matters if Theo is here or if he made a deal with the police. It shouldn't have any bearing on Isaac, but it does.

Maybe it's the leftover anger from the whole *killing Scott* thing. Or maybe the blame falls on the tombstone of his brother and the way Parrish knows what happened there, knows how Theo twisted that memory.

Isaac doesn't know why it matters, but, regardless, he approaches

Stilinski and Parrish. Then, as subtly and quietly as he can manage, he asks, “What’s Theo doing here?”

Stilinski and Parrish both go quiet in their previous conversation. They share a confused glance at each other and then turn those gazes onto Isaac. They look caught off guard and unsure how to proceed.

Isaac continues, “Stiles said you made a deal with him.” And, not combative but not necessarily the most understanding either, “What was it?”

It’s Parrish that answers, surprisingly. “We, uh. If he let himself get taken by the hunters so that we could find and arrest Jiang and Tierney, then we would allow him to park his truck wherever he wants.”

Now, it’s Isaac’s turn for confusion. His eyebrows draw down and he shakes his head. He repeats, “Park his truck? What do you mean?”

Stilinski and Parrish share another quiet look.

This time, Stilinski answers the question. He speaks up, at least having the decency to seem a little unsure about his honesty, about the admittance of, “He’s... He’s living out of his car.”

Isaac wasn’t expecting this. He wasn’t expecting to feel pity for *Theo Raeken*. He wasn’t expecting the quiet rage to settle tight and scalding in his throat, a lump of ash that can’t be swallowed or coughed away.

It’s funny. Because the last time Isaac remembers being this angry, he was angry *at* Theo. Now, he’s angry *for* him.

And it’s not an explosive sort of fury. It’s low and dangerous, shallow and empty and muted. It’s like ice in his veins and fire in his lungs. It’s a calamity of disbelief.

Isaac exhales a scoffing breath, stares Stilinski right in the eye, not a trace of fear in him now, not a single doubt of authority or father figures. He speaks low and easy. He doesn’t let himself shout, but his disapproval is like a toxin in his vocal chords, sour on his tongue, bitter in his tone. “And what did you think being captured meant? Did you think it was just a nice little vacation for him?”

Stilinski and Parrish are staring at him, mouths both open like they’re trying to talk, but Isaac keeps going, doesn’t let them get a word in edgewise.

“You let him get *tortured*,” he scorns, tries not to cry. “And, for what? Just so that he can continue living out of his truck? Just so that he won’t be *completely* homeless?” Isaac’s breath shakes and his jaw juts out. He looks Stilinski up and down, like he’s sizing up, like he’s recalculating his impression. He says, emotion cracking through now, “I thought things were supposed to be different now?”

“Son, calm down,” Stilinski says.

And Isaac can hear himself laughing, humorless and disgusting in his ears. It’s just a single breath of air, a single incredulous snark at the pure *awful* he feels.

“What’s going on, Isaac?” Parrish asks. And, of course, he wouldn’t understand. Because he might have known Camden, but he barely knows Isaac. Because he doesn’t know what Isaac went through when his big brother left the country and got himself killed. He doesn’t know, just tips his voice into something low and secretive, “Is this the thing from the Wild Hunt?”

That’s almost worse than Stilinski. Because, of course, Isaac can’t have feelings without attributing them to a monster. Because, of course, this is so irrational. Isaac can’t possibly be right, can’t possibly speak a word against them.

It’s not the Hunt, is the thing. This is just Isaac. This is just heartbreak. This is betrayal and disappointment. This is cloying, choking, scalding *pity*.

This is so stupid.

Isaac shakes his head and turns to walk away.

—

Isaac knows Parrish is trying to catch his eye, is trying to understand the situation here, but Isaac doesn’t let him in. He just sits on a bench and tries to think.

He doesn’t *care* about Theo. He doesn’t. Theo is a horrible person who has done nothing but destroy things. Isaac doesn’t *care* that he’s come back from the skinwalkers with a little less to prove and a little less interest in chaos. He doesn’t *care* that Theo helped them fight the Ghost Riders and Mr. Douglas, doesn’t *care* because he was only saving himself in the process.

Isaac doesn't care about *Theo*, but he cares about *this*. He cares about the bias of Sheriff Stilinski and the willingness to put others in harm's way.

He cares because he thought things would be different now. He thought what happened to him was a learning opportunity. He thought Stilinski would have realized by now that he was *wrong*.

Because no one cared when Isaac was sixteen and no longer a suspect. No one cared about his livelihood. No one cared that he had no family, that he had nowhere to go, that they were sending a damaged kid into the lair of a monster.

No one cared back then, but Isaac thought that, maybe, just maybe, they would care now.

He thought things were different, but they're not. It's obvious now that nothing was learned. There was no redemption for the sheriff. Because, now, not only does he not *care* that Theo is homeless, but he's also exploiting the fact for his own gain.

It makes Isaac curdle with distaste and disgust. It makes him feel sick to his stomach. And it's so *stupid*. Because he doesn't *care* about Theo. And yet... he cares so much that he's got bile rising in his throat, burning at his esophagus.

And then, as the thoughts keep swirling and Isaac gets sea sick with the motion of it, the lights in the sheriff's station cut to nothing. It's not a total darkness that descends upon them – they're still lit up by the straining spotlights of the cars outside – but it's significantly darker and pointed in its suddenness.

Isaac stands from the bench and moves next to Stiles, watching as Malia asks, "How easy is it to cut the power in a sheriff's station?"

She's talking to Stilinski, but her answer comes from a deputy. She shoves a teenage boy to the ground, holding a pair of bolt cutters in her hand and barking, "Too easy."

The kid scrambles back on the floor, turning off his stomach and staring up and around with wide and scared eyes. He looks pale and frantic and *terrified*.

"Throw him out," Liam grits, stepping up close to the kid. There's anger in the words, something shrouded with a layer of *personal*, something that reeks of vendetta.

“N-No, you can’t, okay?” the kid stutters. He squirms into a more seated position, voice tight with obvious distress. “Please don’t. She’ll know I screwed up.”

He sounds like he’s pleading for his life.

“He’s with them,” Liam spits, giving no sympathy and no warmth. He’s cold around the edges, furious like hardened steel.

“Liam,” Scott warns. Meaning: we’re not going to throw him to the wolves. (Even if he deserves it.)

“Sheriff?” Liam says, but he doesn’t take his eyes off the boy on the floor. Something happened between them, something that Isaac doesn’t know or understand. All he knows is that Liam isn’t giving in, that he’s looking down at the kid in revulsion, “He’s a liar and he’s sick in the head.”

“And now he’s under arrest,” Stilinski says. (And the circumstances aren’t comparable, but Isaac is looking down at the frightened face of a teenage boy and he sees himself reflected there, sees his own pain mirrored in his eyes.) To Parrish, Sheriff Stilinski says, “Lock him up.”

Parrish quickly follows orders, hoisting the teen up to his feet and using a firm grip to escort him towards the cells of the station.

Isaac only has one thought on his mind now: *this is getting out of hand.*

—

Isaac’s not sure how much time passes between the kid being dragged away and the dropping of the grenade. He just knows that, one moment, he’s standing beside Stiles and, the next, he’s hearing Parrish shout, “Everyone get down!”

Isaac doesn’t think, he just acts. He grabs Stiles’ arm and pulls him to the ground, sheltering them against the exterior wall of Stilinski’s office and using his own body as a shield to protect Stiles. Smoke pours around them, the air burns bright, and the sound of the explosion turns to a harsh ringing in Isaac’s ears.

The aftermath starts in slow motion. Everything feels muted by the blast, like Isaac is wading through molasses or floating through space. His movements feel clumsy and messy as he pulls away from Stiles, only enough to not be suffocating him.

“They said till midnight!” Isaac hears Stilinski bark, sees him stomping towards the doors.

Parrish stops him with a more hushed tone of voice, sounding even more distant through the buzzing of Isaac’s skull, “The grenade came from in here. It was one of us.”

Isaac looks around, but he’s not looking for the culprit. He’s taking in every member of the pack, cataloging for injury or harm. He meets Scott’s eyes first, gains himself a little nod and reassuring sort of smile. Malia is directly to Scott’s left, standing up on her own and looking more annoyed than anything else. Isaac casts his eyes away from the pair and over to another, over to where Derek and Lydia are brushing dust off their clothes but sporting no blood.

Isaac breathes in the relief of safety and turns his attention over to Stiles.

Physically, he’s fine, but Isaac quickly notes the fear in his chemosignals and the rich panic in his eyes. His eyes that aren’t meeting Isaac’s, eyes that are instead staring down at his hands – at his fingers.

Isaac knows exactly what that means, knows instantly that Stiles is remembering the bomb in the station and the framing of Argent and Derek. Isaac knows what Stiles is thinking, so he catches one of Stiles’ wrists, presses his reassurance into the veins below.

“Stiles, it’s okay,” Isaac says, to the point and without hesitation. “Forget what I said earlier, yeah? It doesn’t matter that we’re in a town like Beacon Hills. The nogitsune is gone forever and it’s not coming back. You didn’t do this.”

Stiles peels his eyes away from his fingers and up towards Isaac’s face. There are tears pooling in his corners, only seconds away from falling.

Isaac holds up his own hands, holds up his own two fists, and says, “Count them with me, okay?”

One by one, Isaac extends a finger. And, one by one, Stiles counts them. With each subsequent number, with each raise of a digit, Stiles’ heart begins to slow and his breath comes a little more even. With each upward count, the volume in Stiles’ voice goes steady and less shaken, mellowing out until the final tick of, “Ten.”

Isaac nods, like he's proud and drops his hands down towards his lap, back to his knees where he ripped holes with his claws not long ago. Isaac smiles at Stiles and jokes, "Some pair we make, huh?"

Stiles exhales an incredulous sort of laugh, head shaking and still damp eyes glancing up at the ceiling. He whispers, "Yeah, we're so mentally stable, aren't we?"

"The most stable," Isaac confirms.

Stiles looks down at him and their eyes meet and things feel a little bit easier in that moment. And it's funny, in an indirect and ironic sort of way. Because Stiles and Isaac never do things the easy way, they always push and they always prod, but this? Them being together, looking out for each other, taking care of each other? It's the easiest thing in the world.

"Come on," Isaac says, pushing to his feet and holding a hand out to Stiles.

Stiles accepts the offering and Isaac drags him to a stand just as Liam comes pushing back into the front room with Nolan cuffed in his grip. Isaac sees a glinting purple vial and hears him snap, "Wolfsbane. He was trying to kill 'em."

Scott looks between Liam and the kid, eyes going grave and intensity sizzling in his stare.

"Scott," Liam says, dropping his volume with a warning of, "there's something else you need to see."

Then, Liam leads Scott out of the room and towards the back. Isaac considers following them, really does think about it, but, ultimately, he decides against it. Ultimately, he stays at Stiles' side, too worried to leave him alone right now.

He remains at his side and watches as Parrish takes the teenager, dragging him off to some other corner of the station. Isaac briefly wonders what his story is, wonders how someone so young got caught up in something so twisted. Whatever it is, Isaac knows it can't be good.

Isaac tries not to think about it too much. Opting instead to sit back down on the bench, joined by Stiles and his fidgety legs. He's a little more restless than usual, but Isaac doesn't say anything about it. They're all on edge. Isaac is sure his subconscious is filtering out his

excess anxiety too, releasing it in tiny habits that he doesn't notice nor does he care to discover.

"Scott told me you were deferring admission to UC Davis," Stiles says. It's so shockingly casual, so obviously a distraction, but Isaac indulges in it anyway – for his own peace of mind, but for Stiles' too.

"Yeah, we already went through all the official stuff," Isaac says with a small shrug. "Are you gonna do the same with George Washington?"

"Already did," Stiles confirms. "Lydia too. With MIT, I mean."

Isaac nods and things go quiet between them. Isaac doesn't know what to say when they're sitting in a police station surrounded by hunters who want him and everyone he cares about dead.

Well, maybe not *everyone*. Maybe Stiles will be spared.

And isn't that a depressing thought? They spent the last two months of their senior year working to save Stiles' life and bring him back to them. And, now, as a consequence, Stiles might be the only one to make it out of their newest fiasco alive.

Isaac wants to see it as a hopeful thing, the knowledge that at least one of them will get to keep going, but, well, Isaac has been the one left behind too many times to expect good things from such a fate. He knows how soul crushing and hard it is. He knows there's no real victory in survival if you're surviving on your own.

"Dude," Stiles says. "Whatever you're thinking, cut it out. I'm not even a werewolf and I can practically *smell* your angst."

Isaac releases a soft huff of amusement, a soft breath of laughter, but it's almost immediately cut off by a shattering of glass. There's a whooshing sound of an arrow sailing through the window and connecting with a pillar of the station, followed shortly by marked screams of reaction and gasps of shock.

Isaac and Stiles are on their feet in an instant, crossing the station to get a look at the intrusion. The entire pack circles the column as Malia tugs the arrow out of the wall. There's a scrap of fabric threaded through it, marked with smears of blood.

Liam quickly grabs it and says, "This is Brett's number."

Isaac looks a little closer, inspects the green fabric and the white outline of the number 2, the first half of number 28.

“They’re trying to rattle us,” Lydia says, looking a little breathless with eyes a little too wide.

Liam’s heart is pounding audibly in his chest. His jaw is bitten tight and harsh, clenched enough to make the muscles there pop. And then his eyes are flashing with gold as he grips the fabric in his hand, as his knuckles go white with the vice of his hold.

“It’s working,” Theo says.

And Isaac *hates* to agree with him, but...

A woman screams.

It comes out of nowhere, a piercing sound through the station, an echoing shriek rattling through the already delicately balanced tension of the room.

Stilinski and Parrish immediately sprint off in the direction of the noise, but the rest stay firmly rooted. Scott is too focused on helping Liam calm down and Derek is raising his voice to speak over the crowd, giving an announcement of, “Everyone stay back! We don’t know what’s back there!”

It’s a genuine protection of the deputies, but it’s also a pointed move. It’s a holding back and a keeping at bay, and, with the volume of his voice and the intimidating frame of his stature, no one moves against him. (It’s a little amusing to Isaac, but now isn’t really the time for that.)

Stiles catches Isaac’s wrist, whispering in his ear, “One or more of the deputies is on their side.”

It’s a harsh reminder and a strong reality check. Derek is keeping the deputies back to protect them, but also because they don’t know who they can trust anymore. They don’t know who’s already been poisoned by the magnetic draw of Monroe’s power, by the fear that escaped the Wild Hunt.

Isaac spins a little, eyes roaming frantically over the expanse of the station and the uniformed employees.

Isaac doesn’t know what he’s looking for, so, of course, he comes up

empty handed. There's no way of really knowing who the offender is. There's no way of telling friend from foe, betrayed from betrayer. Everyone looks the same – armed with guns and *scared*.

Then, a gunshot echoes throughout the station.

"It wasn't just panic," Lydia says. She's kneeling over two dead bodies – two deputies lost to suicide within ten minutes of each other. One hung from the ceiling and the other with a gun pointed to her own head. "It's in here with us."

The thought was already lingering throughout the space, traveling from person to person like a sliver of doubt or a flash of worry. But hearing it from Lydia is different, hearing it spoken with certainty makes Isaac's heart rate spike and his hand reach for Scott's.

"What do you mean?" Stilinski asks. He's standing on the other side of Isaac. He hasn't looked his way once, though Isaac thinks that has more to do with the horrors in front of them than the conflict of before.

"Whatever's causing the fear," Lydia says, breath coming quick and a little short. "The same thing that drove the wolves to kill each other." She inhales sharply and looks over her shoulder, up at Stilinski with, "It's in here with us."

"Guys," Scott says, quiet and almost gentle. "It's almost midnight." He shakes his head, "We're out of time."

Stilinski sighs, heart heavy and pained. Isaac recognizes the grief in him, recognizes that these two deputies were included in the ones he knew like the back of his hand. He says, "I've already got two bodies. I'm not giving Monroe two more."

Scott's expression catches on the words. He squeezes Isaac's hand as he turns to look down at the two dead deputies, a subconscious clutching at life as he stares down at the pool of blood and the deep lacerations of the wire.

An idea starts to form.

"How long were Jiang and Tierney with the hunters?" Scott asks, turning on Stilinski with an epiphany blooming in his irises.

The sheriff answers with a brief shrug and his first sideways glance towards Isaac. He says quietly, "You'd have to ask Theo."

"Theo?" Scott repeats. His head dips forward in a warped sort of confusion.

Stilinski looks between Scott and Isaac. There's a sense of shock there, a feeling of surprise, like he expected Isaac to rat him out right away, like he wasn't expecting discretion from him. (And something about that ruffles Isaac's feathers, makes him feel a little offended and slighted in a way he can't explain.)

"We made something of a deal with Theo," Stilinski admits, speaking slowly. He has the humanity to seem a little ashamed, a little second guessing in his corruption. He sighs again, releases, "Theo was with them when they were captured."

And it's not the full story, Isaac knows that and so does Stilinski, but they don't have *time* for the full story. So, Isaac doesn't push the topic and Scott doesn't question it. They just go to find Theo. Because, of course, whatever plan Scott is cooking up, it all relies on *him*.

—

"I watched two guys bring them in and tie them up," Theo says, voice gruff and rushed as they push through to the front of the station, to the cracks in the blinds and the light streaming in through the windows.

"Okay, but how long did they actually have Tierney and Jiang?" Scott asks with a quick glance over his shoulder, back at Theo and back at the crux of his secret idea.

Theo gives a noncommittal shrug and a not entirely helpful, "A couple hours, maybe."

Scott peeks through the blinds and out towards the gathering of the hunters, the silhouette of Monroe's turned back. Isaac wants to pull him away from the windows, wants to tuck him into his arms and keep him safe.

He does nothing of the sort. He merely stands there with his hands shoved in his pockets and a burning sensation at the base of his throat.

"Did Monroe talk to them?" Scott questions. He looks away from the

parking lot and over to Theo.

“No. I don’t think so,” Theo says. And he sounds genuine, he sounds honest, but he sounded truthful when he was talking about Camden too. Isaac doesn’t like this, doesn’t like counting on someone who screwed them so royally before. But they might not have a choice. “Just that guy from Eichen, maybe one or two other guys with shotguns. I think they were waiting for Monroe to do the real interrogating.”

“So she *might* not have seen them?” Scott clarifies. Isaac knows this is the heart of his plan, but he can’t quite wrap his head around why any of it matters.

“What’re you getting at, Scott?” Stilinski asks with a subtle lift of his eyebrows and a careful consideration.

Scott sighs and gives a swaying shake of his head, an unsure sort of movement. “I got an idea,” he admits. “I don’t think you’re gonna like it.”

“If it keeps someone from being killed, I’m pretty open,” Stilinski says. Isaac can hear the truth in his heartbeat and the steady patience of his expression.

Scott nods and loses his nervous edge, speaks with certainty and conviction, “Monroe said she wanted Jiang and Tierney brought out.” He flicks his attention over to Isaac and stresses, “Dead or alive.”

It becomes clear now.

They already have two bodies. If Monroe never met Jiang and Tierney, then maybe they can put one over on her. They can give her the bodies of the deputies. And, even if the story doesn’t hold up forever, it might be able to sustain them long enough to get Jiang and Tierney to safety, to clear the station and ease some of the rising pressure.

It’s a long shot, but, right now, it’s also their *only* shot.

And so, the bodies of the deputies are put into black bags and the sheriff fires a blank up towards the ceiling. The second gunshot for the second faked execution. He holds out a hand to Scott and announces, “Five minutes.”

Scott stands and Isaac reaches out to him, grasps at the sleeve of his

shirt with his heart in his throat. Isaac knows that, if this goes south, if Monroe catches wind of the deception, it could be mayhem in seconds. Parrish said it best: they're armed to the teeth out there, and Scott is stepping into their spotlight with only claws and fangs to protect himself.

Scott's eyes lock with Isaac and something quiet and intimate passes between them. There's no dramatic declaration of love or final kiss. It's just the meeting of their eyes and the searing of connection. They don't say goodbye and they don't say be careful.

All Scott says is, "Stay with Stiles and Derek."

All Isaac does is nod and stroke his thumb over the soft fabric of his shirt.

Isaac lets go and their eyes break contact. Then, without another word, Scott, Theo, and Stilinski open the doors of the station and bring the sacrificial body bags out to the hunters.

Scott steps out into the night and Isaac feels his heart trembling with separation, with loss, with *terror*.

—

Isaac does as Scott asked and stays close to Derek and Stiles. He's not sure if he's supposed to be protecting them or if they're protecting him. But, regardless, Isaac plants himself between them and doesn't move, just keeps watching out the window as Scott and Theo kneel next to two twin body bags. (And Isaac's pointedly *not* thinking about being inside a bag like that.)

"Anyone think this is gonna work?" Malia asks, straining up on her toes to get a good look outside. She's met with silence and a sort of impassive stare from Liam. She sighs and drops back onto her heels, gives a defeated, "I'll stop asking."

Isaac misses the first half of the exchange, volume drowned out under the sound of his own heart pounding in his ears. His blood is pumping so fast and so strong he's surprised he's not drowning in it, surprised the riptide doesn't pull him under.

Instead, he's just standing frozen and staring out as his boyfriend kneels on the ground, completely surrounded by armed hunters. It's not a pleasant sight. Isaac's skin is crawling with it, tickling with the urge to run out and save him, to drag Scott back inside kicking and

screaming.

Isaac watches as the body bags are unzipped, as the faces of the dead are revealed to the hunters.

Finally, like it's suddenly been unmuted, he hears Monroe say, "*Show me their tattoos.*"

That's all Isaac needs to hear to know that this isn't going to work, that the plan is going to crumble and everything's going to dissolve into chaos with Scott on the front lines.

Isaac's feet unstick from the floor and, instantly, he's walking towards the door. He doesn't think, just sets his body in motion. His mind tunnels out and all he knows is Scott and his safety and ensuring it. All he knows is the risk Scott is facing and the impossible odds. All he knows is the double doors and the need to break free.

Of course, it was never going to be that easy. Of course, Derek is grabbing him at once, arms tucking around Isaac's and bodily tugging him back and back.

And, now, Isaac knows that Scott was protecting *him*.

"Derek," Isaac whispers, pleads, begs.

But Derek doesn't budge and Isaac can't dislodge his hold. There's too many people around to give into his primal instincts. All he can do is struggle against Derek's biceps as panic clouds his senses and inflates inside him, too much and too big until Isaac is fit to burst with it.

Isaac is certain that the world is about to blow up and he's going to explode with it, but then a new voice joins the crowd and a familiarly tall frame comes into view. Isaac ceases in his struggle and can't believe he actually feels relieved to see *him*.

"*Good thing you're not the only one who can negotiate.*"

Isaac sees Scott moving to his feet. He sees his hackles instinctively settling, like, despite everything, he still feels that inherent safety of a father. (Well, maybe it's not necessarily *inherent*.)

"Dad?" Scott questions. There's no anger in his voice, only soft surprise and a quiet confusion. "*What are you doing here?*"

Agent McCall is just as smarmy as Isaac remembers him being, just as

infuriating to look at. But, still, something in Isaac eases at the words of, “*Making sure no one else dies tonight.*”

It’s Special Agent Dickhead to the rescue.

In the aftermath of the negotiation, the door to Stilinski’s office is shut, closed and tight. The atmosphere in the room is just as stifled as it was before, just as fraught with tension and nerves and the grating feeling of being out of control. There’s no relief in the afterwards, there’s only the question of: *now what?*

“Scott, are you sure about this?” Isaac asks. Because if Scott’s sure, then he will be too.

“I’m not,” Stiles answers for him. He glares up at Agent McCall, like he’s personally responsible for all of his problems and disappointments. (In reality, he’s only partly to blame.) He snarks, “This deal *sucks*.”

“But it’s the only one on the table,” Agent McCall counters quickly, long since used to the hostility from Stiles. “In a situation like this, the best solution is always to de-escalate.” Agent McCall looks past Scott and past Stiles, to Stilinski behind his desk, and asks, “That’s why you called me, isn’t it?”

“To be honest, I didn’t think anyone was going to show up,” Stilinski says with tiny little shakes of his head and a quiet demeanor.

They’ve all gone hushed as the defeat weighs heavy on their shoulders. The room is near silent as they’re stuck between a rock and a hard place, between an impossible fight and a horribly uneven compromise.

Scott looks at Isaac, eyes almost assessing, almost searching for the answer in the blue of his irises. Isaac looks back at him, but he doesn’t really have anything to give. All he has to offer is the strength of his trust and the saturation of his faith.

“Okay,” Scott says, turning his attention over to his father. All eyes in the room dart to him, all a little shocked at the easy submission to the wants of Monroe. “We’ll go.”

And then, they do. Escorted by the police and brought out through the front doors, they stand in front of the station with no fight left to give.

They watch as Jiang and Tierney are taken into FBI custody, watch as they thank Scott for sparing their lives.

They stand in front of the hunters with the promise to leave town and run. Because it's their only chance of survival. Because it's their only chance to get the upper hand. Because it's their only chance at victory.

—

It's not a conversation Isaac wants to have, but he's not sure he has any say in the matter. Because it's Derek that's driving and it's Derek that brings it up with, "Are you going to tell me why you were yelling at Stilinski and Parrish yesterday?"

"I didn't yell," is all Isaac says, a mumbling disagreement. Because he knows he didn't. Because he knows how to keep his voice calm and steady, even when he's terrified, even when he's angry, even when he's hurt.

Derek looks away from the road only long enough to level Isaac with an unimpressed stare and, "But you wanted to."

It's not a question because they both know it's true. They both know that Isaac was holding back. Derek just doesn't know why.

Isaac sighs and runs his fingers through his hair, pulling at the curls just a little. He admits, quiet and almost shy about it, "Theo's homeless."

"Oh," Derek says.

"Oh," Isaac repeats.

And he knows Derek is waiting for him to elaborate, to explain, but Isaac stays quiet anyway. He hesitates, goes silent with the thoughts spinning wild in his mind.

Isaac *hates* Theo. He hates what he did to their pack. He hates the way he used Stiles' mistrust against him, hates the way he used Liam's anger as a weapon, hates the way he used Corey's fear for allegiance, hates the way he used Isaac's grief to pull him closer. He hates the way Theo *destroyed* them – the way he killed Scott.

But, at the same time, Isaac remembers the night his dad died. He remembers the terror he felt, he remembers running to Derek, who,

back then, Isaac hardly knew. Derek, who, back then, had no interest in handing out favors or hospitality. Derek, who Isaac had no choice but to turn to for *help*.

Isaac remembers how terrifying it was, to have no sure safety, to have no security. He remembers how terrifying the unknown was.

He remembers and he knows what Theo's going through.

"They made a deal with him," Isaac says softly. He keeps his voice quiet like he can somehow diminish the damage and the harshness of the truth. "If he got himself captured by the hunters so they could find Jiang and Tierney, then they'd *allow* him to keep *sleeping in his car*."

Isaac hears the venom in his voice, hears himself failing at neutrality, but he doesn't even care anymore. Because he remembers the way Stilinski used to look at him, like he was something dangerous, something to feel sorry for, something to *fear*. He remembers the way Stilinski turned his back on him the second his name was cleared, remembers how he never tried to find or help Isaac. He remembers being cast aside, ignored, *forgotten*.

More silence passes between them, like Derek doesn't know quite what to say to that, like he doesn't know how he's supposed to feel. And Isaac wouldn't blame him because he doesn't get it either. He doesn't understand this weight he feels on his chest, this feeling like anxiety that tingles in the tips of his fingers.

None of it makes sense. Isaac wants to rip his hair out.

Derek lets go of the wheel, holding it with one hand while the other reaches out to clasp around Isaac's wrist. He guides Isaac's hand away from his unruly curls, away from the tugging at his roots that apparently exists outside of Isaac's thoughts too.

"I feel like I should *do* something," Isaac whispers.

"For Theo?" Derek asks. There's something shocked there, something surprised at the way Isaac *cares*. (Isaac can't blame him for this either. After all, he's made it his mission to make sure everyone knows how much he doesn't approve of Theo being around, how much he *hates* him.)

And yet, "Yeah."

Then, they pull up outside the animal clinic and the conversation ends

before it really begins.

Isaac's becoming increasingly grateful that he never really unpacked most of his stuff. It has made it incredibly easy to pretend to pack and to pretend to flee. Enough so that he and Derek are the first to make it to the animal clinic – other than Scott, of course.

Isaac goes straight to the back room, but Derek must recognize that there's a need for some semblance of privacy because he stays in the front under the guise of waiting for the others. Isaac knows that Derek is going to be able to hear him and Scott talking whether he wants to or not, but he doesn't really care.

"Hey," Isaac says, stepping up to one side of the metal table while Scott stands on the other.

"Hi," Scott returns, but he doesn't let the barrier remain between them. He's quick to cross around to the other side, to reach out and touch Isaac, hands on the side of his arms like he's ensuring that he's real and that he's safe.

Isaac lets him take what he needs, simply gives him a soft smile and a gentle voice of, "You okay? I mean, seeing your dad and two suicides in one night. It's..."

Isaac shakes his head and refuses to finish his sentence. There's no one word to describe it, no way to frame the tragic agony that was yesterday.

"I think he bought the lie," Scott says in lieu of a proper answer.

Isaac doesn't take it. He nods in acceptance of the fact, but draws his hands down into Scott's, repeats, "And you? Are you doing okay?"

Scott plays with Isaac's fingers, dragging his own through and over them, knitting in and out – intertwined and twined and intertwined again. He gives a small shrug and says, "I've been better. But I've also been worse."

"Yeah, I think that says more about the absolutely fucked up way of our lives rather than, y'know, your actual well-being," Isaac says with just a hint of snark to lighten the mood.

It works to draw a weak sort of smile up to Scott's cheeks. He shrugs

again and says, “Is it bad if I’m just used to it?”

Isaac flattens his lips in a sympathetic line and gives a brief shake of his head, a quiet, “No. No, I think we’re all a little desensitized.”

Scott frowns. He goes quiet for a few seconds. Then, does the classic Scott McCall deflection and turns the subject around on, “What about you? Are *you* doing okay? I know being at the station still makes you a little...”

Scott doesn’t seem to know how to end his sentence either, so he pulls an uncomfortable sort of face in place of words – just goofy enough to make Isaac crack a smile of his own.

“I’m okay too,” he says honestly. Because, for all intents and purposes, he is. He’s still a little shaken by the sudden panic attack and the resurgence of his claustrophobia. He’s still a little stuck on Theo and the police bias and the homeless factor of it all. But none of it seems important enough to get into now, not after death and the supposed fleeing of the town. “Besides,” he says, “Stiles took good care of me.”

And, from the front room, Derek calls, “Hey! I helped too!”

Isaac tips his head back with a half-laugh and half-groan. But, silently, he’s grateful for the interruption and the diversion of the subject. (And he’s pretty sure Derek was fully aware that Isaac would appreciate it.)

“Shut up!” Isaac calls back anyway, just for show and just for appearance.

Scott definitely sees right through him, but he just gives a soft laugh and presses a kiss to Isaac’s jaw, just a soft and brief connection. He whispers, still not quiet enough to be hidden from Derek, but still a little more intimate, “I’m glad you’re okay.”

Isaac smiles and says, “Yeah. I’m glad you’re okay too.”

—

It doesn’t take long for the rest of the pack to arrive – spare Corey and Mason, who will be here soon, but not yet.

While they wait, Deaton has them gathered around the table and shares the discovery he made at Eichen. There’s a stone slab on the table, marked with two separate halves of a face, both connected like opposite sides of a story. One is engraved and carved and the other

drawn on the surface in black marker, but both are just as vital to the meaning of the symbol, both just as certain despite the discrepancy in permanency.

“It’s called the anuk-ite,” Deaton explains. “It’s an ancient shape-shifter and a creature of disharmony. It *uses* fear. It uses paranoia to create *anger* and anger to create *violence*. It can turn neighbor against neighbor, friend against friend. It can make entire communities cannibalize themselves.”

Deaton sounds far too excited about this. Isaac feels like the stone slab has just been dropped on his head. He feels woozy with the information, lightheaded with the miserable odds.

“And this is what we let out of the Hunt?” Stiles questions. He scoffs and rolls his eyes a little, says, “You guys should’ve just left me in there. I mean, seriously. What the hell.”

Nobody laughs.

Stiles mumbles, “Tough crowd.”

“The creature feeds off the fear and grows more powerful,” Deaton says. Isaac wants to punch him in the face, if only because he can’t handle another creature that turns his fear against him, that gains strength from his terror. “It’s made up of two sides – one beautiful and one hideous. We think this could mean two creatures or two people. And... once they merge, they’ll be unstoppable.”

They seriously need to stop coming to this animal clinic. Nothing good ever happens here.

—

Ding.

The door of the animal clinic opens with a ringing of the bell. It practically slams closed, followed by the stomping of feet and the angry voice of Mason, not quite shouting, “You told me you were leaving!”

“I had to,” Corey says, and he’s quieter, more appealing and apologetic.

“You *lied*,” Mason stresses. And Isaac can hear the emotion in his voice, can hear the betrayal and the pain in it. He feels guilty, feels

horrible for the deceit, but Corey is right. They didn't have any other choice.

"We all did," Liam counters.

Mason steps around the corner and sees the entire pack waiting for him in the back room of the animal clinic. Scott gives him a meager and endearing little wave.

"So..." Mason points at them, eyes narrowing, "this was the plan all along?"

Scott nods, inclines his chin with a motion of, "Sorry, Mason. But my dad had to believe that we left Beacon Hills. *Everyone* has to believe it."

Mason looks around at the group, looks from Scott to Isaac and back to Corey. He leans against the doorframe of the clinic, tilts his head, "Then, what happens next?" And, "We fight back now, right?"

"What did you think we were going to do?" Scott asks. He smirks a little, lip pulling with the amusement of, "Run?"

Because there's no chance of that happening. They don't give up that easily. They never have and they never will.

Triggers

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 16

Word count: 7,784

Chapter Notes

Don't ask me where Derek, Stiles, and Malia are because this is the one chapter where I actually have no clue

The car is stiff with tension and impatience. They've been waiting for too long and the stress of it is starting to eat at their skin. Argent has checked his watch three times in the past two minutes, Scott keeps squirming in his seat like he can't bear to sit still, Lydia has reapplied her lipstick twice, and Isaac longs to roll his window down and get just a single breath of fresh air. The car is starting to feel stale and crowded and too quiet for comfort.

Lydia's phone chimes with a message. She reads it, body shifting to face the backseat, telling Isaac and Scott that, "It worked."

"About time," Isaac mumbles, already reaching for the door handle.

Scott snags his wrist before he gets a chance, pulling Isaac back and saying, "Wait."

Isaac stops, looks at Scott's open expression and the slight widening of his eyes. It's the kind of look he gets when he's listening to something. So, Isaac does the same, training his ears past the shared breaths of the vehicle and over to the armory.

The sound comes quickly into focus and he says, quiet and low, "I hear them too."

"Hear what?" Lydia asks, tentative and nervous.

"Heartbeats," Scott answers. There's a chorus of thudding thumps and pounding blood, soft and faint in the distance, but not far enough away to be safe.

"How many?" Argent questions, intensity to his gaze and uncertainty to his tone.

“Ten?” Scott guesses. He slumps a little, resting closer to the window and craning his head towards the warehouse and shrugging, “Maybe more?”

“Too many,” Isaac cuts in easily. Because one or two heartbeats they could deal with, but this is a whole crew of hunters, a whole selection of people just waiting to kill them.

“Are we breaking in or not?” Lydia asks, a little restless in her seat.

“Not,” Argent says without sparing it another thought. He twists around in his seat a little, enough to look back at Isaac and Scott. (Isaac refuses to think about the Katashi gun deal.) “The armory should be empty by now.”

“We could... we could take down a few hunters,” Scott says, but it sounds more like a question, more like a lilting of his voice and a seeking of approval.

Argent shakes his head, gruff and stern with, “We’re dealing with a dozen well-armed hunters who have orders to *kill* you on sight.”

This is going to be so much harder than they thought.

—

Argent reaches for the keys in the ignition, like he’s about to start the car, but Lydia stops him from doing so. She places her hand over his and says, “This is our only plan.”

Gerard thinks they’ve left Beacon Hills, but that’s not going to last long, especially with Theo and Liam making themselves seen at the zoo. This is their only chance to enact this particular plan – their *only* plan – but that doesn’t mean it’s worth the risk. That doesn’t mean they should go through with it.

“And it’s not working,” Argent says. He falls back into his seat and stops in his attempts to run, but he doesn’t give in easily. He’s still overly cautious, overly protective, and overly calculated. (And it sounds like a bad thing listed like that, but Isaac knows it isn’t, knows Mr. Argent has their best interest in mind.)

“We can still do this,” Scott says, trying to rally positivity and bring hope back to the group. “We just have to give Theo and Liam more time.”

Argent checks his watch again, says, “We have ten minutes.” Then, volume growing and emphasizing, “*Ten minutes* before Gerard and his men flag this vehicle. Once that happens? We’ll be seen as a potential threat.”

Nobody has to ask what would happen after that. After that, they would be surrounded and attacked in an instant. And, here, in the parking lot of Gerard’s *armory*? They can’t afford that kind of blunder.

“Lydia?” Scott tests. “You okay?”

Isaac turns his eyes over to her, takes in the tension in her form. She’s pressed up and forward in her seat, staring sharply out through the windshield. Isaac cranes his neck a little to peek past her shoulder and try to make out what she’s looking at, but all he sees is a still too crowded parking lot.

“Yeah,” Lydia says quickly, sinking back in her chair. And, “I think so.”

That gives Isaac a spark of doubt, a fleeting feeling of unrest, but nobody questions it. They trust Lydia to be honest and they have more important things to discuss right now than the slight flicker in her composure.

“We should call off this mission,” Argent reiterates his feelings on the matter, adjusting behind the wheel as if he’s getting ready to drive off.

Isaac wants to agree with him. In the logic of his mind, he knows there’s too much at stake here, too much that could go wrong. But then, he wonders what will happen if they let this opportunity pass them by. If they don’t do this, there’s just as much risk, just as much chance at failure. At least if they try, then there’s a chance of success, as slim as it is.

“Brett and Lori are gone, Jiang and Tierney are still missing,” Scott’s voice raises in the shelter of the car, stress and hints of anger piercing through. “Gerard’s always one step ahead of us—” *if not twelve* “—we have to do this now.”

“We’re too exposed, Scott,” Argent says. He doesn’t rise to anger, just speaks his mind with quiet confidence.

Isaac looks between him and Scott, looks at the two warring forces

and the two different ideas there. He understands both points of view, understands the risk in both decisions.

Maybe, they just need a little more time to come to the right one.

“You said we had ten minutes,” Isaac says. Meaning: they can stretch this out a little longer, debate a little more thoroughly.

Argent glances at his watch again and says pointedly, “Nine.”

Nine minutes it is.

—

They don’t spend the nine minutes sitting idly though. Eventually, the tension runs too thin and the impatience gets the better of them. That’s when Scott grabs for the door handle with a whispered, “*Screw it.*”

This time, Isaac reaches over his body to knock the handle out of his grip and slide the door’s lock into place.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Isaac asks, still pressed a little closer to Scott than necessary, like he can physically restrain him with nothing more than his body heat. (Scott doesn’t try to move again, so Isaac counts it as a success.)

“I’m gonna lure them away, so that the rest of you can get inside,” Scott says, like that isn’t a stupidly self-sacrificing idea.

“Absolutely not,” Isaac says.

“We *need* a new plan,” Scott argues, something of a petulant edge to his voice.

“Not one that’s going to get you killed,” Isaac snarks back, responding to the slight whine in Scott’s tone with his own self-assured smugness.

Scott sighs and shrugs, “I can bring the thermite charges?”

“We need those for the armory,” Isaac reminds him.

“Explosion would buy you time, but not *enough* to get in and out of the armory safely,” Argent tacks on.

“Guys.”

“How about using the tunnels?” Scott suggests, grasping at straws and trying to find any way to make this work. Isaac respects and admires his optimism, his inability to give up, but he’s not sure it’s going to be enough this time.

“We could get underneath the building, but we’d still need to sneak in undetected,” Argent explains, putting a damper on Scott’s ideas.

“Guys.”

“The ventilation system?” Scott says, almost like he’s making a wild guess here.

Argent shakes his head, says, “Same problem.”

“Guys! They’re leaving!” Lydia calls, finally loud enough to get their attention, finally urgent enough to draw them out of their measly brainstorming session.

She’s right. The sound of engines turning over floods the parking lot, followed by the mass exodus of black vehicles, all driving around a corner and disappearing out of sight.

Isaac smirks a little, glad to be right for once. They just needed a little more time. And, now, they can strike.

—

Isaac stands next to Scott with his back pressed against the wall as Argent slides the armory door open just a crack, just enough to slip the barrel of his gun through and fire the purple goo at the security camera, concealing its lens and allowing them to get in undetected.

Once they’re through the door, Scott readjusts one of the duffel bags on his shoulder, handing the other over to Argent and listening closely as he says, “The thermite charges will take care of the weapons. Just make sure you’re clear when they detonate.” His eyes flick to Isaac for a moment, and, “Okay?”

Scott nods, and then the two groups split off. Argent and Lydia head towards the security room while Isaac and Scott make their way to the actual armory.

They rush through the initial stretch of hallway and then slow as they reach the final corner, once again pressing up against the wall to stay out of sight. Isaac plasters his back against the wall and slows his

breathing and *listens*.

He hears only one heartbeat, only one guard outside the door.

Scott must hear it too because he doesn't wait a second longer. He sprints around the corner without a moment's pause. He grabs the guard by his gun, using the grip to shove him bodily against the wall before slamming the metal end into his chin.

The guy goes slack in Scott's grip, head bashing into the wall as he falls unconscious, drooping in the hold and then clattering to the ground as Scott lets go.

Isaac really shouldn't be impressed. He would've been able to take out the guard just as easily, but, still, he finds himself smiling at Scott like he's *proud*. Maybe it's the fact that Scott did that mostly one handed – considering the bag still held in his other – or maybe it's the fact that Scott acted before Isaac could even think to do so.

Regardless, Isaac is pleased and smirking just a little as he rounds the corner to join him.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Scott asks, brows furrowed and eyes narrowed.

Isaac shrugs a little, gives a noncommittal hum and a quiet answer of, "My boyfriend's a badass."

Scott laughs, soft and quiet and flushing faintly pink. Fortunately for him, the door of the armory beeps before they can linger in this moment of easy teasing, of soft flirting. Instead, they focus on pushing open the metal door and stepping inside the armory.

They're rushing and quick, but it's all for naught. The shelves are completely empty. The armory is entirely void of guns and weapons.

"They knew we were coming," Scott whispers.

And they can't destroy what isn't there to be destroyed.

—

Scott looks around, opening every trunk and every crate and trying valiantly to salvage the plan, but his efforts are futile. Every corner of the room has been swept and cleared, all weapons removed and taken to a second unknown location.

Then, static crackles through the intercom, bringing with it Argent's voice, saying, "*Guys, get out of there now.*"

Isaac quickly agrees with the sentiment. A feeling of unease has settled on his shoulders, a weight of a plan turned to shambles and the unknown of what's next. So, he says to Scott, "Let's get out of here before they get back."

Scott presses up from where he was kneeling, moving quickly to follow Isaac, both their hands instinctively outstretched towards each other as they go.

They're three feet from the exit when Scott stops in his tracks, when his hand closes around Isaac's wrist and pulls him to a halt too, when he says, "That scent."

He looks past Isaac to a large sliding door, a branch off the armory that Isaac doesn't remember seeing on the blueprints. Isaac focuses past the metallic scent of steel and further under the gap between the floor and the bottom of the door. There's something familiar there, something distinctly *werewolf*.

Scott looks at Isaac and says, "It's Jiang and Tierney."

"Guys, you need to leave now."

Argent's voice is urgent and stressed, but Isaac knows it's already a lost cause. If there's any chance Jiang and Tierney are behind that door, Scott isn't going to leave them there. He isn't going to leave until he's certain – one way or the other.

So, there's no surprise from Isaac when Scott says, "Help me with this," as he rushes to grab the handle.

Isaac sighs, but gives in because the sooner they turn over this stone, the sooner they can leave. And, besides, if Jiang and Tierney are here, then Isaac does *want* to save him. And so, he crowds behind Scott and gets his own grip on the door handle. Together, they start to pull.

They strain and grunt as they tug with all their might. The door rattles and shakes, but it's not giving yet. The metal grinds and stays strong in place, like the hunters don't want them getting through, like they don't want them discovering what's on the other side. And that only fortifies Isaac's efforts, only makes him plant his feet and pull *harder*.

"Don't open that door!"

Argent's order comes through the speaker, but by then it's too late. By then, Scott and Isaac have gotten leverage and momentum. By then, the door is already snapping open.

Immediately, Isaac and Scott know their mistake. Immediately, all three armory exits slam closed with a definitive click of the latch and a turn of the lock.

They're trapped.

But the thing is: Isaac doesn't want to believe it. So, despite the obvious sealing of the exits, he still has to try to get out. He stills runs across the room to the nearest door, still slams against the metal and jiggles the locked doorknob. He still presses his weight to it, but it doesn't budge and it doesn't open.

Still, he moves to the next. There's something practiced about his movements, something routine and almost casual about it. It feels like instinct, like it's the most obvious thing in the world to do. Like, even if he knows this isn't going to work, he's still going to try anyway. Because it's what he's supposed to do. He's supposed to try, and so he does.

But, as expected, all three doors are shut and locked and not giving in the slightest. It makes Isaac's breath catch in his lungs and sparks a flare of poison nerves through his veins.

"Scott?" Isaac calls. His voice sounds tight with emotion, with fear and with panic. He sprints back to the smaller room, to the only open door that they should have left shut. Scott is standing there and Isaac is whispering, "We're locked in." He shakes his head, heart rate spiking with, "Scott..."

Scott is on him in seconds, placating hands on his shoulders and smoothing down his arms. "Okay," he says. "It's okay." And, "I thought your claustrophobia was getting better?"

Isaac swallows around the lump in his throat, Adam's apple bobbing as he gives a jerking shake of his head, a trembling motion of disagreement and *no*. "It was, but then I was triggered at the station yesterday, so, now, I don't – I don't know, and–"

"Hey," Scott says gently. A hand trails down from Isaac's shoulder to his chest, over his surely pounding heart. "That was just because of the anuk-ite, yeah?" Again, "You're okay."

Isaac gives a feeble nod. He tries so hard to believe it, tries so hard to find some truth in the statement, because he *wants* it to be real. The room is made of metal walls and it already feels too much, but Isaac wants to *try*. He wants to try to be okay, to keep it together – for his own sake and for Scott's.

He can do this.

“Where are Jiang and Tierney?” Isaac asks, changing the subject to give himself some reprieve, to take the pressure off his shoulders and alleviate the weight of attention.

Scott stops touching him and Isaac wishes he wouldn't, but then he's turning and Isaac is going with him, shifting past the map on the wall and over to the display case along the far wall.

“That's all that's left of them,” Scott says. He sounds sad and hurt and tired. He sounds remorseful.

Because, inside the case, are Jiang and Tierney's tattoos, the markings that belied their trickery and forced them all to run. It's the symbol of Satomi's pack, the symbol of stacked rocks and a balancing act of control. They were the last of her pack, and, now, that's all that remains of them.

Scott walks away, like he can't bear the sight anymore, like he can't bear to look into the evidence of defeat, of *failure*. He moves back to the edge of the smaller room and Isaac follows in his steps. Because the walls in here are closer and more cramped and he aches for the freedom of sprawling square feet.

But, as Isaac makes to step into the larger room, Scott loops an arm around his waist and tugs him back. A soft noise of surprise – of question – sounds at the back of Isaac's throat. There's something of a protest there, something of an instinct to break out of the sudden grip, but then Isaac notices the red laser of light.

Scott holds him close and they stare as it sweeps over and across the ground, as it travels the room in even intervals. Back and forth and back and forth and back and...

“It's a motion sensor,” Scott says, answering the unspoken question.

Isaac narrows his eyes, squints against the light with confusion heavy in his bones. “If they already know we're here... then what do they need a sensor for?”

Scott looks up at Isaac then, lets his tightly looped arm go a little more slack around him, lets himself let go a little bit. He says, simply, "I don't think we want to know."

And then, a banging sound echoes throughout the enclosed space of the armory. It comes from up above, through the cracks of a fan and the ventilation system, a repetitive and steady rhythm of noise. It gets a little louder and a little louder, and then—

It stops. The banging goes quiet, replaced instead by Argent's muffled and distorted voice, traveling through the vent with a shouted message of, "*Don't trip the sensors!*"

Isaac wasn't planning on it, but, now, a second red light has joined the first. And, now, it's about to get a lot harder to avoid the path of the lasers.

"Come on!" Scott yells.

And then he's moving and Isaac is following his lead without even thinking. He's still a little distracted by the trapped space and the fate of Jiang and Tierney, but his body trusts Scott like no one else. So, he follows his movements and doesn't even consider hesitating.

Isaac goes blindly after him, leaping over the first sensor and crouching his height down low to duck under the second. Scott vaults up to the top of one of the metal shelves and Isaac joins him moments later, narrowly avoiding the lasers and landing on top of Scott with a quiet grunt shared between them.

"Okay," Scott breathes in relief.

Isaac moves to press up a little bit, to give them both a bit of personal space. But then, like a cruel twist of fate, a third and final laser joins the array. This one glides right above them, forcing Scott to wrench Isaac back down with a startled, "Whoa! Wait!"

Isaac collapses against him, pressing their bodies flush together to avoid the tripping of the sensor.

And then, they're just lying together on top of a metal shelf, not an inch of space between them. Isaac almost wants to laugh at the absurdity of it all, but, of course, he doesn't.

Instead, he turns his chin just enough to look up at Scott, to get an up close view of his brown eyes and the slightest uptick of his lips.

“See?” Scott says with the barest hints of a smile, with the smallest show of pleasure. “This isn’t so bad. It’s actually kind of... nice.”

“Oh, yeah,” Isaac agrees sarcastically. “This is great. Except, you know, for the part where we’re locked in a room designed by hunters with no way of getting out and no idea what that sensor does.”

“Well,” Scott corrects, tipping into inappropriate amusement, “we *sort* of know what it does.”

“Right,” Isaac grumbles. “It probably kills us.”

And it shouldn’t be funny, but it is anyway. Scott huffs a small laugh that vibrates through Isaac’s chest and melts some of his distress, turns his anxiety to something easier, something less all consuming and terrifying.

Scott drags a hand out from where it was pinned between them, and, mindful of the sensors, drops it to Isaac’s waist. He says, more gently and more sincere now, “We’re going to be okay. Lydia is a certified genius and Argent knows the hunters better than anyone. We couldn’t ask for anyone more capable to be on the other side of those doors, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Isaac whispers.

“They’re going to get us out of here,” Scott all but promises. “We just have to be patient for a little bit.”

Which has never been Isaac’s strong suit, but he simply hums in agreement and lets his head fall to rest on Scott’s chest. He positions his ear over Scott’s heart and listens to every beat of life and every pump of blood, lets it lull him into a false sense of security, a faux feel of safety.

—

Isaac tries to anchor himself in the sound of Scott’s heartbeat, but he knows his resolve isn’t going to last and he’s pretty sure Scott knows it too. He can already feel himself beginning to crumble, can already feel the restless energy kicking up inside him, stirring grains of sand like the wind over the beach.

The room might be big, but their range of movement isn’t. Isaac can’t move for fear of tripping one of the sensors. He’s stuck in only one position and it’s too reminiscent of the freezer. It makes his breathing

go shallow and his heart rate skyrocket and his fingers itch.

“Isaac,” Scott says, voice hushed and quiet and soft. They don’t need volume at such a close proximity. They can hear each other fine, can note every switch in feeling and every skipping of pulse. “Isaac, you’ve gotta relax.”

He strokes a hand down Isaac’s back, trying to soothe the spasming of his muscles and the skidding of his breath. He keeps the movements slow and gentle and achingly reassuring, but it’s not really working and they both know that too.

“Lydia and Argent are going to get us out of here,” Scott reminds him.

Isaac wants to listen. He wants to believe him, but, “We don’t know that.”

Because they don’t. They have no idea what the hunters were planning. For all they know, by now, Lydia and Argent have been attacked and restrained – or worse: killed.

“Isaac,” Scott says his name again, but it sounds like white noise. It sounds far away even at such close range, it sounds like it’s being spoken through the door of a freezer, muted and muffled.

Isaac whimpers and *tries* to take a deep breath. He feels like he’s being compressed, like his body is shrinking against the weight of crushing walls around him. He clears his throat of sand and speaks, weak and quiet and hurting, “The waiting was always the worst part.”

“What?”

“When my dad locked me in the freezer,” Isaac whispers.

“We don’t have to talk about it,” Scott says quickly. His hand drags up Isaac’s back and between his shoulder blades. It’s a comforting touch in contrast to the pressing of the walls. It’s a supporting sort of weight, like a reminder of what Isaac is fighting for.

“No, I – I can talk about it,” Isaac says. “I want to.”

He doesn’t know if he’s lying or not. Maybe this is just misguided, self-inflicted torture. Or maybe letting the words free will help. Maybe this is the distraction he needs, as sick and twisted as that sounds.

“Okay,” Scott whispers. His hand pushes up a little higher still, fingers catching in the hair at the back of Isaac’s neck, the strands that have grown out in the past few months.

“Even when I knew no one would hear me and Dad wouldn’t cave and the door wouldn’t open, I... I always started the night with a fight,” Isaac says. He keeps his voice as quiet as he can manage. One of his hands finds Scott’s chest and begins tracing circles there, like some sort of hypnotic measure to calm his mind. It doesn’t really work, but Isaac keeps going anyway. “I always tried to kick and push and *scream* my way out because – because it’s the silence that was worse.”

Scott tugs a little on one of Isaac’s curls, but he doesn’t say a thing. For a moment, he just listens as Isaac drags up trauma that he usually keeps buried, that he usually ignores as much as he can.

“It’s like an instinct, I guess,” Isaac says. “But then... giving up was always an inevitability too. I tried – I tried not to, but I was always so *tired*. I didn’t have the energy and the hopelessness always got through. It always *took over* at some point. And... that’s when things got really scary.”

Scott hums a little.

“That’s what was really bad about it. It wasn’t *really* the tiny space that scared me. It was the places my mind would go to and the *endlessness* of it all. Because I’d be in there for *hours*. With nothing for company but the dark and my own thoughts. Cramped up in a space like that, screaming for help while you know that *no one* is coming to rescue you...” Isaac heaves a breath, a choking sigh that rips from his lungs. He wants to scrub a hand over his face or through his hair. But he can’t afford the movement, so, instead, he merely nuzzles his cheek against Scott’s chest, whispers, “It’s terrifying.”

“Sounds like it,” Scott says easily, granting validation like it’s the most natural thing in the world. And Isaac can hear the pained undertones to it, the discomfort in hearing Isaac *describe* his greatest darkness, the worst hauntings of his past. But Scott is trying so hard to keep his own misgivings at bay and under wraps. And that helps, in some roundabout way, feels good to be cared for so gently.

Isaac only nods, a light and subtle movement.

Scott must realize that Isaac is mostly done talking now because he fills the silence with his own voice, with, “So, if you’re in a small space, and you’re trying to keep fighting until the very last moment...”

what if you *choose* not to give up?" He poses, "To not let the hopelessness in?"

Isaac shifts a bit. He shouldn't, but he does it anyway, fidgets against Scott and tries to alleviate the sharp pain of stillness. "I always do anyway," he says. "It's like a reflex."

"But," Scott says, still not pushing too hard, still just trying his best to offer some form of help or guidance, "if you hold off until that reflex kicks in, you have more time, right?"

"Not much," Isaac mumbles.

"But *more* time to fight your way out?"

"I guess," Isaac whispers.

"More time to be rescued?" Scott adds.

"More time to be in agony. I mean, did you forget the part where it feels like I'm going out of my mind?" Isaac counters. It's a little too sharp and a little unfair, but he can't help the spite in his lungs or the scathing of the truth.

Scott makes a quietly sympathetic noise, smooths his hand over Isaac's hair. He's silent for a long stretch of seconds, just lets his hands do the talking, do the encouraging with light scratching at his scalp and gentle pets over the crown of his head. Until, eventually, "Figuratively though," he speaks softly. "What if you don't let the darkness in? What if you don't have to scream or move to keep fighting? What if you just have to keep mentally strong?"

"I don't think it works like that," Isaac protests weakly.

"Can we try anyway?" Scott asks. He slides a hand towards Isaac's chin, tilts his head just enough that their eyes can meet, position strained and a little uncomfortable, but worth it for the connection forged between them. "I know it's scary, but... can we try to keep holding onto the hope?"

"Okay," Isaac whispers faintly, mouths over the word. Because, for Scott, he'll do anything. For Scott, he'll try to do the impossible. Especially if they're doing it together.

Isaac tries for as long as he can. He tries so hard to latch onto the idea of rescue, to tell himself that the longer he stays calm, the greater chance he has of survival. He tries for as long as he can, but there's only so much he can do.

Eventually, Isaac's body starts to twitch. They're not conscious movements. He wants to stay paralyzed and frozen still, but he's beginning to squirm. His legs kick out backwards or his hand spasms or his neck twinges – all tiny movements against his will, all little jerking motions of *risk*.

"Isaac," Scott whispers, so gently and so calmly. "Take a breath."

Isaac tries, tries, *tries*. He tries as hard as he can, but his lungs shudder and shake and he can't get a grasp on the air. It slips through his teeth and out his nose and gets stuck in his throat. He's choking on the panic, seconds away from flailing.

Scott attempts to pin his limbs in place, using his own hands as restraints, but that only makes Isaac's movements more wild. That only stokes the fire of his fear and brings a burst of flame and startled actions.

"Iz, you're gonna trip the sensor," Scott says.

The words wash right over his head. All Isaac can focus on is the urge to buck out of his hold and stretch his legs and push his arms out. He just wants to *move*. And it's hard because there's no physical barrier keeping him trapped, it's only the sweeping laser of light and Scott's hands on his arms and it's not *enough*.

"Okay," Scott says. Isaac hears him, but it's muted and distant. "Executive decision: I'm going to flip us over."

Isaac doesn't understand how that's a good idea. He doesn't understand how being pinned under Scott's body weight is going to help him feel any better. But, then again, maybe it's not about being *better*. Maybe it's just about surviving long enough to be rescued, maybe it's just about staying alive.

Isaac doesn't answer in words, but he lets Scott's hands find his hips and lets his muscles go malleable.

It's a risky transition. The shelf is narrow and there's not much room for adjustment or error, but they take it slow. Scott times the intervals of the laser and shifts when they have the largest set of seconds to

spare. He uses his own weight as leverage to push Isaac, tipping him to one side and following him around in the rotation.

Scott gets Isaac under him and, in a spark of clarity, Isaac grabs him by the shirt and *yanks* him flat against his chest just before the sensor flies overhead. Scott makes a soft grunt of surprised sound, but doesn't try to lift up again.

For a moment, it seems like the plan has worked. For a moment, Isaac revels in the flush of contact and the security in Scott's body over his – protecting him, almost. For a moment, everything is fine and still.

Then, Isaac's jacket falls open and a ring dagger falls out of his pocket.

There's nothing either of them can do to stop it. The weight drags on Isaac's shoulder and then disappears with a slow motion clattering to the ground. The dagger jumps against the floor, bouncing back up to hit the lowest sensor, passing through the red beam of light.

Instantly, an alarm begins to blare and smoke rushes into the room. A blast of harsh and cold and forceful air slams into Isaac and Scott, the shock and strength of it sending them tumbling off the shelf and onto the floor.

They hit the ground hard, grunting at the impact and the strength of the collision. Isaac tries to take a breath to steady his aching joints, but finds himself gasping at nothing. In a matter of seconds, in a handful of aborted and failed breaths, Isaac is dried out and *drowning*.

He glances over to Scott, sees his mouth open and his eyes wide, sees his hand come up to his throat in a startled sort of movement. And Isaac knows this is happening to the both of them, knows Scott is feeling it too.

The oxygen has been pulled from the room. And, well, now they know what that sensor does.

—

Isaac leans back against the shelf and against Scott. He rests his head on his shoulder, feels too weak to hold himself up. He was already breathless before the air was stolen from his lungs, so, now, he feels like he's fading into nothing. Now, his skin is damp with sweat and his eyes sting, but all he can really focus on is the burning in his ribs and the press of Scott against him.

“Scott,” he whispers.

“Don’t talk,” Scott says back, but Isaac doesn’t listen.

Because it’s obvious now that they’re dying, that they may not make it out of this armory alive. And Isaac isn’t ready, he doesn’t want this to be the end, but if it is? If this is it, then Isaac is going to make these last minutes count.

“Scott,” he repeats. His throat is raw and it *hurts* to speak, feels like a million grains of sand are cutting him open, but he *has* to do this, “Scott... I lo—”

“Don’t you dare,” Scott interrupts. His voice has a little more strength than Isaac’s. Maybe it’s because he had more oxygen before this started or maybe it’s the whole *true alpha* thing. Regardless of the reason, he’s going to last longer than Isaac will. And, somehow, that’s the worst thought of them all. Because Isaac doesn’t want to live without Scott, but he’s done it before. He’s practiced in seeing Scott dead. Scott’s never been on the other side of it before, never seen him be so weak and cold and empty. Isaac doesn’t want Scott to see him that way. “You’re not allowed to say it,” Scott says. “You’re *not* dying.”

Isaac huffs a weak and humorless sort of laugh. It’s a complete waste of air, but he can’t find it in himself to really care.

“This isn’t the hero’s death I planned for you,” Scott whispers.

Isaac smiles and presses impossibly closer, tucks his face into Scott’s neck and just rests there. He lets his eyes close and lets his body go still as he soaks in the presence of his first love, his final moments.

“I’m sorry,” Scott speaks into the stale room.

Isaac can’t find the sound to say it back, even though he wants to. Because he *knows* this is his fault. He knows that if he wasn’t so claustrophobic, wasn’t so incapable of sitting still and controlling himself, then they wouldn’t be in this situation. If Isaac could have just held it together a little while longer, then they’d be lying up on that shelf right now and not dying a slow death for lack of oxygen, for lungs gone empty and stalled.

Isaac can only hope that Scott is saved. He can only hope that once his breath runs out, Scott will keep going long enough for Lydia and Argent to break him out of here. Isaac doesn’t care if he dies by his

own mistake, he just can't let himself be the reason Scott goes too.

Scott finds Isaac's hand and cradles it in his. Isaac doesn't have the strength to hold him back, doesn't have the strength to intertwine their fingers. But, still, he appreciates the touch.

A tear falls down Isaac's cheek.

"It's okay," Scott says softly. His thumb brushes the tear, wipes it away and lets it settle on the pad of his thumb.

The words only make Isaac want to cry harder, though he physically *can't*. Because it's not okay. Because that's what everyone says right before they fade away. That's what Boyd said in Derek's arms, what Allison said in Scott's, what Aiden said in Ethan's, what Derek said in Isaac's.

Scott knows they're running out of time, running out of air, and he's using the last of his breath to reassure Isaac, and it's not... it's not okay.

"I love you," Scott says. And it's not fair that he's allowed to say it when Isaac's not. It's not fair that he's wasting his breath on Isaac. It's not fair, but it's what happens anyway.

It's not fair, but it's the last thing Isaac hears before he passes out.

—

Isaac comes to with a gasp of air and a startled cough.

The first thing he sees is Scott kneeling beside him with fear in his eyes and sweat sitting along his brow. Isaac blinks up at him, slow and bleary. A faint smile finds his lips as light flourishes in the brown of Scott's eyes and relief floods between, as Scott grins wide and toothy down at him and whispers, "You scared the hell out of me."

"Sorry," Isaac whispers back. And he can *breathe* again. He can breathe as the parched feeling in his lungs diminishes, as he gulps in mouthfuls of oxygen, as he drinks more than just his fill.

Isaac pushes up to a seated position with the help of Scott, and the second thing he sees is the busted down door and Lydia standing there a little breathless – for reasons unrelated to wicked motion sensors. Isaac's eyes flit between her and the twisted steel, the distorted metal. Lydia stares back at him with a faintly challenging glint in her eyes.

“Thanks for saving us,” Isaac says, smiling at her. “I never doubted you.”

Scott slaps him on the shoulder, light and teasing with, “Yes, you *did*.”

Isaac laughs – airy and tired, but genuine.

Then, Scott pushes up to his feet and holds a hand out to Isaac who takes it readily. He lets Scott hoist him up to a standing position. He lets him keep holding onto him after the fact too, even though he doesn’t really need the support, even though he knows it’s more of a reassurance than a necessity.

Argent comes out of the smaller room with a rolled up piece of paper in his hands – the map off the wall – and says, “We need to get out of here before the hunters come back.” And, “Come on.”

Isaac moves to walk towards the door, but Scott stops him. He keeps a grip on Isaac’s wrist as he leans down to pick something up off the ground, to retrieve the ring dagger from the floor and to hold it up to Isaac with a smirking, “You dropped this.”

Isaac rolls his eyes and shoves the dagger back in his pocket where it belongs. Then, he snatches up Scott’s hand and pulls them both out of this wretched room and out towards the warm sunlight of fading evening.

—

The drive back to the McCall household is still and quiet. Isaac spends most of it tucked up against Scott’s side, feeling his fingers running through his hair, catching only on a couple unruly knots. Isaac almost falls asleep from the pure comfort and the absolute exhaustion, but he jars back to wake as the gravel of the drive crunches and rumbles under the tires.

The four of them go inside together, but, since they have to wait for the rest of the pack to arrive before they can discuss the events of the day, Isaac and Scott split off from the rest of the group to go upstairs.

Isaac follows Scott mostly on autopilot, but stops in the doorway of his bedroom. He stands under the doorframe and leans his weight against one side, just a slight slouch of his posture and a resting of his tired bones.

"I'm sorry," Isaac says, barely a whisper of breath, just a soft mutter of, "for losing control. We... We almost died and it – it would've been my fault."

Scott turns on his heel and walks right back up to Isaac. He stands in front of him and plants his hands on either side of Isaac's face, cupping his cheeks in his hands, all gentle and warm and kind.

"It's not your fault," Scott says. And, "You didn't set up the fire suppression system, did you?"

"No," Isaac sighs. He wants to tip his head back and avoid eye contact, but he doesn't want to break Scott's hold, so he forces himself to withstand the connection, to stare into his eyes even as his face goes flush under Scott's hands.

"Then it's not your fault," Scott vows. He punctuates the statement with a stroking of his thumb over Isaac's cheekbone and a soft kiss to his lips. It's chaste and quiet and consoling, a soft brushing of their lips, a whisper of touch.

"Scott," Isaac speaks when they part. It's a hushed sound, broken up at the back of his throat and almost a little pleading now.

"Hm?" Scott asks. He still doesn't let go, but his hold does go a little more casual, falling closer to Isaac's jaw and neck and shoulders. His eyes are burning with focus and intensity, all of his care and adoration pointed right at Isaac.

And he can't take it anymore. He's ready.

"Can I say it now?" Isaac asks. There's a fake coyness to his voice, a fragile shyness that lives somewhere in the pit of his stomach.

"Yeah. Go on," Scott says. But then, he kisses Isaac again. He doesn't let the words free yet, just presses their lips together a little more firmly, a sliding spark of feeling and wonder and...

Isaac pushes into him and then pulls back. Their lips separate with a wet and faintly embarrassing little click of sound. Isaac stares at the pink of Scott's mouth and then up to the brown of his eyes. He just looks at him for a moment, just memorizes every curl of his lashes, the freckle under his eye, the slight bump in the slant of his nose.

Then, he whispers, "I love you."

He expects it to be stiff and slow and difficult. He expects the words to sound clumsy and foreign in his voice, but, instead, it just sounds right. It just *feels* right.

Scott lights with a smile, so bright and blinding that Isaac has to reach out and touch him, has to grab Scott's hip to keep himself from keeling over.

Scott says, "Say it again."

And Isaac does.

—

Isaac and Scott head downstairs as soon as they hear the voices starting to rise in level. There's no shouting, but there's an urgency to their tone and they know they've waited long enough.

They find the map spread out on the kitchen table, surrounded by Stiles, Melissa, Argent, Lydia, Mason, and...

"Dad?" Scott asks as they step out of the darkness and into the dim light of the kitchen.

"The guns," Agent McCall says in lieu of a proper greeting, "they've all been distributed *legally* to the citizens of Beacon Hills. All of them and at no charge."

And that explains why the armory was so empty. Gerard didn't move the guns just so that the pack couldn't get rid of them. They moved them with purpose, they moved them into the hands of the manipulated, the used, the *scared*.

"What, he just gave them away?" Scott questions, coming up to the table with a tone of confusion to his voice.

"No," Argent says. He looks away from the map of nemetons and over to Scott, "He's arming his army."

The room goes quiet and thick with tension as the words lay heavy over their shoulders. The citizens of Beacon Hills, the people they've spent years trying to protect, have now been turned against them. Nobody is safe and nobody is innocent anymore. Everyone is a target and everyone is an enemy.

Then, out of nowhere, Lydia shouts, "Get down!"

The glass shatters a second later. Lydia grabs hold of Mason and pulls them to the ground of the kitchen just as two arrows fire through the window, just as two arrows fly right towards them.

Stiles makes a move like he's going to run to Lydia, like he's going to try to get to her, to pull her to safety.

Isaac and Scott don't think or hesitate, they just act.

Isaac grabs Stiles and Scott grabs Isaac and then the three of them are falling to the ground together.

Isaac shoves Stiles between himself and Scott as they use their bodies to shield him against the rain of bullets and the deafening sound of gunfire. In the fray, Isaac's hand finds Scott's and squeezes tight as the room is sprayed with broken glass and lit by the red lights of firearms.

It feels like hours before the shooting stops. It can only be a handful of minutes at most, but it feels like eons. Time stretches thin as the bullets keep coming, as they can do nothing to fight them. There's nothing they can do to stop the attack.

All they can do is try to cover the bodies of the vulnerable. All they can do is duck for cover and scramble for safety.

Eventually, *finally*, the lights draw away and the guns stop firing. But, when they do, there's a pool of crimson blood on the floor, slowly expanding and growing with each passing second.

Werewolves of London

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 17

Word count: 8,800

The hospital is quiet and stark. The crisp fluorescent lights buzz above with sound accompanied only by the beeping of machines and the shuffling of footsteps. There's no words spoken. There's just the hushed weight of fear and the shuddering of Scott's breath.

His eyes are red rimmed and wet, his hands clasped so tightly together that his knuckles paint with white.

Isaac doesn't say anything, but he reaches over and slips his hand between Scott's. He lets Scott's two hands connect around his own, lets Scott squeeze just shy of too much.

Scott looks over at Isaac and their eyes lock with attentive focus and care. Isaac embeds his stare with as much comfort as he can muster, lets it bleed into the blue of his irises and shine in the white light of the hospital waiting room. There's a question glistening underneath though, a wonder of the fate of Melissa McCall.

Scott gives the tiniest of nods, and then tears are spilling over his lashes and down his cheeks. Relief clouds the air like a cool rush of snow, like an avalanche barreling through the room. It knocks the wind out of Isaac just a little, makes his breath catch in his lungs, but he recovers quickly. He slips his hand out of Scott's in favor of tucking him into his arm, in favor of pulling Scott close and tight and secure. He lets Scott cry into his shoulder, lets him find release for the pent up wall of emotions.

Isaac feels it too. He feels the relief and joy of knowing that Melissa is alive and that she's going to be okay. But Melissa isn't his mother and it isn't quite the same, so Isaac makes himself strong for Scott in this moment. He takes care of him the best he can.

He cradles Scott in his arms until a nurse comes and greets him by name, telling him he can come back and see Melissa – just briefly because she has to rest, but enough for Scott to see the proof of her well-being.

Isaac releases his hold on Scott and lets him go on without him, though Scott does glance over his shoulder a few times, like he doesn't necessarily want to do this alone, but he has to anyway. They won't let more than one person back right now and Isaac isn't family. So, Scott goes off on his own and Isaac sits in the stark waiting room in stifling silence.

It's five minutes later when a flash of brown hair comes running into the hospital, a flurry of panic and fear that Isaac recognizes at once. He's very quickly on his feet and stopping Corey in his tracks, planting sure hands on his shoulders and keeping him still.

"Mason?" is the only word Corey can manage. There are tears in his eyes too, but these aren't tears of relief. There's terror in these tears, terror like Scott's claws in his neck or Douglas' whip around his throat.

"He's okay," Isaac assures him easily. He squeezes his hands, presses his thumbs into the tight muscles of Corey's shoulders. "He's already out of surgery and he's going to be fine."

"Can I – Can I see him?" Corey asks. His voice wobbles and shakes with feeling, with the sinking of his anxiety into something more mellow, something still worried but less visceral.

"Not yet," Isaac says apologetically. "He's still asleep from the anesthesia."

Corey falls with the admission. His eyes of brown and flecks of green go sad and empty – despondent, almost – losing their desperate edge. But, still, seeking comfort and reassurance, he repeats, "But... he's okay?"

Isaac nods, gives him a weak smile. "Yeah. Bullet missed everything that matters. You can thank Lydia for that."

Corey returns the nod and says, "Yes. Yes, I will definitely do that. Do you think she prefers chocolate or flowers?"

Isaac huffs a quiet laugh and shakes his head, ignoring the question only to sneak a hand around Corey's back and guide him over to the not-so-comfortable waiting room chairs. He says, "You can ask her when she wakes up." And, "Let's sit down, yeah?"

Corey listens and they sit together in a slightly less claustrophobic quiet.

Scott stomps down the hallway and out past the waiting room, doesn't even spare a look towards Isaac. He's a man on a mission, steaming with resolute anger and determination. Isaac instantly knows that something isn't right, that this isn't going to end well. He's on his feet in a second, holding a palm out to Corey and saying, "Wait here."

Then, he rushes after Scott, following after him with calls of, "Scott!" And, "Slow down."

Scott stops in his tracks and rounds on Isaac. His fury is bubbling under the surface, present in the clench of his jaw and the set of his eyebrows. He shakes his head, "I can't keep watching people get hurt."

Isaac nods, holds his hands out gentle and placating. "I know that, but just. Take a breath, okay? We need to be logical about this."

"There's *nothing* logical about this. *Both* my parents are in the hospital. They got shot!" Scott protests. There's a whine of pain to his voice, an agony of fear.

Isaac reaches out and wraps soft fingers around Scott's forearm, stroking gently and keeping him still. He says, "I *know*. And we're *going* to do something about it, but we need to be careful. We need to stop and think for a second."

Scott's shoulders sag a little and his head tips back to stare up at the ceiling. When he returns to neutral, his eyes are more tired than angry. He whispers, "She looks so weak, Isaac. And she... she could've died."

Isaac tugs Scott into his arms without a second thought, wraps him up in his long limbs and as much comfort as he can manage. He presses his warmth into Scott's skin, presses a kiss to his hair, presses out the reassuring words of, "I know, Scott."

Isaac's not sure how long they stand there, taking refuge in each other, sheltered from the storm. It could be one minute or maybe ten, but they don't part until the hospital doors slide open and Derek and Malia walk through.

Isaac catches Derek's eyes over Scott's shoulder as the hug breaks and they part, but they don't lose contact – their hands stay tied together between them. Isaac catches Derek's eyes and sees the relief run

through him, sees it spark and ignite in forests of green as they assess each other, see each other as well and safe and unharmed.

“Where’s Stiles?” Malia asks. “Is he hurt?”

Then, as if being summoned by his name, Stiles walks around the corner – coming from a direction Isaac knows leads to Lydia’s room – and joins them, saying, “No, I’m fine.” He claps a hand on Scott’s shoulder, meant to be casual and pointed, but appearing more soothing than anything else. “I had two werewolf shields to protect me.

There’s humor in his words, but the thanks there is genuine and firm too, like, as hard as it might be to see Lydia injured, he knows they did what they had to do to keep him safe.

“What do we do now?” Derek asks. He’s looking at Scott with the question, looking to him for his leadership and his call. (That makes something warm and content flare in Isaac’s stomach, but he tries his best to ignore it.)

Scott spares a quick look over at Isaac, a quick moment where their eyes flit together. Then, solidifying and stabilizing, he says, “We fight back.” Scott’s hand grips a little harder at Isaac’s, likely a subconscious show of the strength building within. “No more peace summits, no more running, no more half-measures.”

“I’m good with that,” Malia says quickly, as if she’s been waiting for this moment all along, waiting to sink her teeth in.

“And Gerard?” Stiles asks. “Monroe? The hunters?”

“We take on all of them,” Scott says without missing a beat. The hunters may have succeeded in bringing injury to the pack, may have succeeded in shooting through glass and hitting vulnerable targets. But, little do they know, they also succeeded in giving them *motivation*.

“Then we’re going to need more firepower,” Derek says.

“Not just firepower,” Scott says. He grits his teeth, grinding them a little. “We need an army.”

And, from there, a plan forms quickly. Their options for allies are limited and unfavorable, but they have to at least *try* to rally their troops. So, Malia and Derek will work on convincing Peter to help

while Scott and Isaac focus on the Deucalion. In the meantime, Stiles offers to hang back at the hospital in case anything happens – and to personally watch over Lydia (and Corey, at Isaac’s request).

Then, they part ways with nothing but a teasing salute from Stiles and the whirring of the automatic hospital doors.

—

They have to wait for Deucalion to arrive at the McCall household, which, in turn, gives them a little too much time to think and ponder and dwell on the tragedy of yesterday. They’re too close to the scene of the crime and too soon after the events to be safe from it, to be able to *ignore* it.

Here, sitting in the living room and waiting for the knock on the door, Scott’s anger turns to sadness, to grief, to blame.

The messy swirl of feelings burn at Isaac’s lungs on every inhale, sharp and cloying and overpowering. Isaac tries to keep his own chemosignals steady, hoping that his calm will bring Scott some peace of his own, but he’s fairly certain it’s having the opposite effect. As in, Scott’s emotions are rubbing off on Isaac instead, causing his own nerves to grate and fray.

Isaac doesn’t really know what he’s doing when he opens his mouth. He’s just looking for some way to bring levity and heart to the silence, to make Scott’s lip twitch with subtle amusement.

The thing is: Scott doesn’t use terms of endearment all that often. It’s still mostly just Isaac or Iz, but, occasionally, he’ll drop a sweetheart, babe, or, one time, even honey. That was so unexpected, so sickly sweet, so juxtaposed to Isaac’s sharp edges that it shocked a laugh out of him. (Scott hasn’t said it since, but Isaac secretly hopes he will.)

Scott throws around nicknames like praise or reassurance, but Isaac doesn’t. Until now, apparently.

Because he opens his mouth and spills with, “Hey, babe–”

And that’s as far as he gets. It tastes strange and wrong on his tongue. The word catches in his throat and stalls on his lips and goes tight and awkward and out of place.

Isaac attempts to save the misstep with a dramatically faked gag, a cough, and a ramble of, “Yeah, no, sorry. I hated that.” And, again, for

the effect of it, but also for genuine apology, “Sorry.”

Isaac gets more than just a lip twitch in response. He gets a full fledged smile and a startled laugh and bright eyes. Scott turns to look at him with such fondness in his gaze that Isaac almost bursts into tears, almost overflows with the feeling. Scott laughs, sound pouring out of him like sunshine through a window as his scent eases of pain and mixes into something more subdued, more natural in the combination of sadness and happiness – like they’ve canceled each other out.

Isaac digs an elbow into Scott’s side, just a little punishing, and whispers, “Shut up.”

Scott’s laugh dies down a little, but Isaac can still hear it in his voice when he speaks, saying, “It’s okay. I... like when you say my name.” He goes a little pink around the edges, like he’s embarrassed to admit that, “You say it like it’s something special. No one has ever said my name like you do.”

And that makes Isaac blush too. He feels it spread across his cheeks as he suppresses the urge to bury his face in his hands, gives a quiet protest of, “You can’t just say shit like that, Scott. *God.*”

Scott chuckles again, a little proud and pleased with himself. Smug, he adds, “See! There you go again.” He slips into an impression that Isaac hopes is inaccurate, a crooning of, “*Scott.*”

The name sounds savored and cherished, like it’s something delicate and gently held. It makes Isaac’s ears burn and, now, he tucks his face into Scott’s chest with a half-aborted groan of bashful discomfort.

Scott’s hand very naturally finds his hair and tugs at one of his curls, makes it spring and bounce. He repeats the movement a few times before Isaac bats his hand away and presses to sit up more fully. He levels Scott with a glare and says, “I was just trying to cheer you up and *this* is how you choose to repay me?”

Scott keeps smiling, like he can’t bring himself to stop. He shrugs and says, “Well, it worked, didn’t it?”

Isaac supposes that’s true. And so, he drops his mostly faked and definitely exaggerated irritation and falls into Scott’s side once more, less hiding and more indulging the second time around.

They don't have to wait long after that for the knocking on the door. They hear first the pounding of footsteps up the front porch stairs and then a gentle knock.

Scott and Isaac press up from the couch and Isaac gives a muted and soft whisper of, "Let's do this, superstar."

And that pulls a very real and very flustered smile from Scott. He looks over his shoulder at Isaac, staring up at him with a tongue pressed into his cheek and his head shaking in amusement. Isaac smiles back at him, a little softer and sweeter than he usually allows himself.

(He can't help himself really. It's just... cute, the way Scott's savior complex runs so deep that being likened to a superhero by his boyfriend makes his heart tick up a pace.)

Isaac gestures Scott forward and towards the back of the house. Scott follows the movement and opens the door with a creaking of wood, bringing Deucalion into their sight.

Isaac bristles a little as he steps heavily over the threshold and into the kitchen, boots crunching on the broken glass that has yet to be swept up. Because it was one thing to work with Deucalion in a preventive measure against Theo. They knew Theo would find Deucalion, knew he would try to get into his head, so they got to him first and they used him. But this? This is different. This is letting him into Scott's home and into their side – their *trust*.

And that feels dangerous in a way that makes Isaac's skin itch.

"You know my fighting days are over," Deucalion says casually, walking between Scott and Isaac to step through to the living room.

Isaac and Scott share in a quick and incredulous look. Scott gives word to it, saying easily and with a soft huff of breath, "That's hard to believe." And, "You once said you'd kill *any* living thing that got in your way."

Deucalion has his back to them, but Isaac still watches him closely. He watches the way he nods a little, the way his shoulders stiffen up at the quote from his past. "I said a lot of things," Deucalion admits. "But, eventually, the bodies pile up so high that... even a blind mind can't ignore them."

Isaac scoffs on his next exhale. He doesn't mean to do it, really. It's

just that Deucalion sort of makes his blood boil – this pacifist act and this reformed image, this incredibly useless and unhelpful man before them.

“I’ve changed,” Deucalion says, turning around and looking right at Isaac. His eyes are sincere and there’s something like remorse there, something that makes Isaac’s nose wrinkle and his stomach twist.

“Maybe you have,” Scott says, cutting through quickly, like he knows Isaac is struggling with this, with *his* presence. “But Gerard hasn’t.” He takes a small step closer to Deucalion and Isaac swallows the instinct to grab his hand and pull him back. “And he’s not going to stop with Beacon Hills. He has a map with places circled: Toulouse, Brasilia–”

“Logashkino, Zhengzhou,” Deucalion continues. He sounds almost awed by it, almost surprised by, “Nemetons of the world.”

Scott gives a small nod, goes serious and flush with conviction, tone quiet and level. “You *know* him. You can outthink him, you can read him.”

“You’ve beaten him before,” Deucalion says, like that means anything, like that’s all the reason he needs to leave this burden to them. He’s trying to pass the responsibility off on Scott, trying to make him do this all on his own.

It makes Isaac seethe, just a little. Because the one time that Scott is asking for help, the one time he’s trying *not* to shoulder it on his own, *that’s* when people stop offering? That’s when people turn their backs on him?

“He’s got a lot of help now,” Scott says. He doesn’t bend or sway under the initial rejection, just keeps steady and focused. Isaac admires him more than he can really stomach. “Actually, he’s got pretty much everyone.”

“You think *Gerard’s* turned you into a pariah?” Deucalion questions, and there’s something disapproving in it, something like he’s talking down to them. He corrects, “Your *power* does that. You’ll always be an outsider because of your abilities.”

Scott frowns like he doesn’t quite agree.

“Gerard wasn’t the first person to capitalize on the general public’s fear of the *other*,” Deucalion shakes his head, cuts his eyes to Isaac and then back to Scott. “And he won’t be the last.”

“So help us *stop* him,” Scott says, an undertone of pleading there.

Deucalion takes a small step towards Scott and a subvocal growl rises in Isaac’s throat. He forces it down, hopefully before the other two notice.

“I think you’ve realized that stopping Gerard now... means killing him,” Deucalion says. He gives another shake of his head, another short movement of disagreement. “I’m sorry, Scott. That chapter in my life’s over.”

Deucalion turns like he’s going to make for the door, like he’s going to walk away and run and hide. And that’s where Isaac loses his patience.

“So, that’s it?” he questions.

“*Isaac*,” Scott whispers a hissing protest, a warning of noise. Isaac sticks a placating hand out in front of Scott, a gesture of, *I’ve got this*. He keeps going past the protest, keeps the venom dripping from his tongue.

“You’ll kill Erica and Boyd, but you won’t kill Gerard? *That’s* where you draw the line?”

Because Deucalion might not have killed them directly, but he’s still the reason they died. He was still so power hungry that he assembled a team of alpha werewolf super villains. He was still so very willing to kidnap and lock them in a bank vault – a tiny metal room – for *months*. He was still so disillusioned that he thought letting Kali destroy them was a good idea.

It might not have been his claws sinking into their flesh, but it’s still *his* fault that they’re dead.

Deucalion pivots once more to face them fully. His demeanor seems a little shaken for the first time in the entire exchange. He wavers a little, like he doesn’t know quite what to say to that. “I’m–”

“If you apologize,” Isaac cuts over him, “I *will* rip your throat out with my teeth.”

The scary thing is: he means it. He doesn’t want to hear those words from Deucalion. He doesn’t need empty condolences. They won’t bring his first pack back and they won’t help them win this war.

“If you were really sorry,” he keeps going, he can’t stop, “you would stay and *help*. You *owe* it to us after what you did. You can run all you want, but the war is going to catch up to you eventually. Gerard isn’t going to stop until we’re *all* dead.”

Deucalion tilts his chin back, almost like he’s impressed. He swallows, “I didn’t say I wouldn’t help you. I *said* I wouldn’t kill. But I *can* offer you guidance.” He turns to the door again, like he can’t stay, like he has to go. “My first piece of advice? You might need to... *lower* your standards for allies.”

“I thought we already were,” Isaac spits.

Scott shoots Isaac a warning sort of look, but it lacks heat even as he holds a hand out in front of himself, even as he tries to express to Deucalion that they definitely didn’t mean that. (Though they both know it’s true.)

Deucalion doesn’t seem offended. He merely smirks and drawls, slow and a little smug, “Lower than me.”

Then, the door opens and Deucalion steps through. The latch clicks closed behind him and then he’s gone and they’re standing in the living room in a stunned sort of silence.

“Sorry,” Isaac says, once the footsteps have retreated and a car engine has started outside. “I got a bit carried away.”

Scott quickly shakes his head, snagging Isaac’s hand and tugging him closer. “No, you...” Scott pauses, thinking and petting at Isaac’s palm, “you did good. It needed to be said.”

Isaac smiles a little, faint and quiet. He nods with the same sort of feeling, the same sort of resigned and tired energy. He could really use a nap right now.

Scott’s thumbnail drags over a line in Isaac’s hand, tickling just a little as a quiver comes to his lips and he says, “So... superstar, huh?”

Isaac simply laughs.

—

Eventually, Derek arrives at the McCall household. He comes alone without Malia in tow, but he explains her absence quickly, saying, “We didn’t have much luck with Peter. Unsurprisingly, he just wants

to run and fend for himself, but Malia's going to keep trying to get through to him."

Scott gives a soft sigh of almost defeat, like he's growing tired of all these fumbled moments and failures – both big and small. And Isaac gets it. It sort of feels like ever since the anuk-ite started making trouble in Beacon Hills, they've been unable to find their footing. It's just been one calamity after the other. And, truthfully, it's exhausting.

"Do we have any other options? Anyone else we can call?" Isaac asks, like he's trying to keep the hope alive for Scott. To Derek, he asks, "What about Braeden?"

Derek shrugs and frowns. "I don't know," he admits. "I've been trying to call her, but I haven't heard back. So."

Isaac joins in Derek's frown. His head falls to the backrest of the couch, neck stretching and trying to think as the three of them sit in an uneasy sort of silence. He says, quietly, "Maybe we're fighting the wrong battle."

He gets two confused looks in response.

"Maybe we should be trying to stop the anuk-ite instead of the hunters," Isaac suggests. It's a long shot, he knows, but there's more than one enemy at play here. They can't focus too much on one and lose track of the other, not when doing so means potentially risking it all.

"We don't know enough about it to fight it," Derek says simply. "I mean, at least with the hunters we know what we're dealing with."

Isaac nods his agreement, but then he wonders what good that's done them so far. When they can't even get their feet off the ground, when they can't even manage one minor victory. And, now, he's following Scott into the land of pessimism and the vat of defeat.

Derek places a hand on Isaac's shoulder, like he can sense the twist in his mindset, and says, "We'll discuss it more when Malia comes back. For now, I think we all need a bit of rest."

And that's how Isaac finds himself falling asleep, pressed against the fabric of the couch and head dipping to Scott's shoulder.

Isaac wakes alone on the couch. The setting sun seeps through the windows, hitting Isaac's shut eyelids with a glare of light that jars him back into consciousness. In an instant, Isaac is achingly aware of the empty space beside him. His heart jumps to his throat and he chokes on the fear of it all.

Then, he hears soft voices from the kitchen.

Isaac stands from the couch and approaches with quiet caution. He steps over the squeaky floorboard and past the coffee table and into the doorway.

He's not sure what he was expecting to find, but this certainly isn't it.

Derek and Scott are sweeping up shattered glass.

For a moment, Isaac leans against the doorframe and just watches them. They both definitely know he's there, but they don't greet him quite yet either. Instead, they keep cleaning and Isaac keeps watching as the domestic task is passed between them. It feels so natural and warm despite the cool air trickling in through the broken window, despite the chaos that lies in wait for them right outside the door. It's like a little bubble has formed around the kitchen, a little space separate from the agony of war.

"Sleep okay?" Scott asks eventually.

Isaac hums in affirmation, nods against the wood of the archway. He doesn't speak yet, too groggy from the unexpected nap. He's not sure how long he slept for, but the sun was high in the sky when he faded out and now it's disappearing beneath the trees, so it must have been a good few hours.

"I tried to wake you to help us clean, but Scott wouldn't let me," Derek says. There's a quiver to his voice that conveys humor and the exaggeration of the truth, something lighthearted and soft.

"Oh," Isaac says.

Scott smiles at him, maybe a little sheepish, and says, "You clearly needed the rest."

He's right, of course. Scott had managed to pass out for at least an hour back in the hospital waiting room, but Isaac had been too on edge to do the same. But then, knowing that everyone was going to make it out alive, his body had settled and the adrenaline eased. Then,

Isaac's body was screaming for sleep after the day in the armory and the attack of the night.

Now, he feels grateful that Scott let him take his time in waking.

"Thanks," he says softly.

Scott nods and continues sweeping. The floor is mostly cleared up now, as are the rest of the kitchen's surfaces – the table, the chairs, the island. The glass shards have been collected in a dustpan and dumped into a garbage bag.

Isaac doesn't offer to help now that they're so close to being finished. Instead, he just stands there and watches two of his favorite people working together in such simple and casual harmony. It makes his heart beam in his chest, likely reflected in his eyes too – a glow of shining happiness.

Isaac stands there until he hears footsteps up the stairs and Malia enters through the screen door and into the kitchen. They all turn to look at her with bated breath and nervous apprehension.

She gives them a singular shake of her head, a lonely denial that she couldn't get through to Peter, couldn't make him care about anyone other than himself. (Isaac feels disappointment flare in his stomach and that almost makes him *angry*. Because he never should've expected anything better from Peter, because he *always* lets them down.)

"There's something else we can try," Malia says. Her eyes flick to Scott, "But you're not gonna like it."

"What?" Scott asks. He props his broom against the wall and turns his full attention onto Malia, onto whatever idea she's brought with her.

"There's another pack of werewolves I know about," Malia says. She explains, "They gave up everything that makes them human: rules, morals, electricity."

Scott stays blank and confused, but Derek flickers with recognition. He says, "I've heard of them. They call themselves the Primal. Their pack symbol is a circle with a crescent on top."

"They're *strong*," Malia says.

"Not only strong," Derek disagrees. He looks over to Scott, like he

wants to ensure he has all the information. (And isn't that an ironic sort of twist of fate, a changing of his ways.) "They'll kill anything that crosses their path."

"Are they any worse than Deucalion and Peter?" Isaac asks, authentic in his wondering. He's never heard of this pack, but those words sound eerily similar to how Deucalion was once described. It makes him question where the line is drawn, what makes one person forgivable and another not.

"At least I *know* Deucalion and Peter," Scott says with a jutting of his jaw and a frustrated sort of tone. "I don't know anything about this pack. I – I've never even heard of them."

"Does it matter if they can help us beat Gerard?" Derek asks. He sounds sincere too, like he's really asking Scott to reconsider his morals just this once.

Scott doesn't. He simply says, "It matters if they're murderers."

"So we should forget about it," Malia says, and it's almost a question, but not quite tentative enough to meet the mark.

Scott shrugs. His eyes roam over the room with thought, with confliction. He sighs, "Probably." And, "I mean, we're not that desperate." Looking around the group, "Are we?"

The silence is answer enough. It's a resounding and echoing, yes. It's definitive in its quiet, in the stifling muted static of the air.

Isaac's phone starts to ring. He jumps a little at the sudden onslaught of sound, at the vibration in his pocket. He recovers swiftly, pulling his phone from his pocket and reading the contact name of: **Stiles**.

"Hey, everything okay?" he answers quickly. Isaac can hear Stiles breathing on the other end, thin with anxiety and fraying with fear. He can hear his heart pounding. He can hear the hitch of his throat and the faltering of his tongue. And then...

"Lydia's missing."

Isaac returns to the hospital for the second time that day. Immediately, he almost gets knocked to the floor by the speed with which Stiles runs at him, with the way their bodies collide as Stiles'

shoes squeak to a stop.

“I went to check on Corey and Mason for, like, five minutes, and then, when I came back, Lydia was just *gone*,” Stiles says. He’s panting and his eyes are lit with pure and unfiltered panic. He rambles without a pause of breath, just a steady flow of, “I looked around the entire floor and asked some of the nurses, but nobody’s seen her.”

“Okay,” Isaac says slowly. He puts a hand on Stiles’ shoulder, a physical tamping down of his emotions and a steadying of his balance, pushing him back a little, to let their eyes meet. “We’ll find her. Just – Slow down for a second.”

Stiles gives an affirmative nod, but it’s frantic in nature. It’s a wild bobbing of his head, a jerking of his neck that looks almost painful.

“Take me to the room she was in,” Isaac says, hoping that the clear and simple instructions will help Stiles to focus on something other than the sure fire terror in his veins.

Stiles listens easily, taking off down the hallway with strides faster than his shorter legs should be able to manage. There’s something about the uncertainty of love that makes obstacles like speed completely irrelevant, utterly moot.

Isaac follows Stiles down the hall and up the stairs and to the left, keeping up only because of his own height and werewolf agility. Stiles practically sprints the last leg, busting into room number 206 without care for being gentle.

Stiles is rushing, but Isaac is calmer. Not because he isn’t scared for Lydia – because he *is*, he definitely is – but because he’ll be more useful with a level head. Stiles is frantic and terrified, so Isaac has to be the reason of the two of them, has to have focus and consideration.

The first thing Isaac notices is the messy nature of Lydia’s hospital bed. The sheets are all tangled and strewn halfway to the floor, like maybe there was a struggle to free herself from the confines of the threadbare mattress.

The second thing he notices is a neatly folded pile of her clothes. He recognizes the gray sweater with the split back and the blue jeans from the day before.

“Her clothes are still here,” Isaac says.

Stiles looks from Isaac to the stack and back again. They both know what that means: Lydia left in only her hospital gown.

(And Isaac tries very hard not to think about sophomore year, about the sheriff questioning him in the cemetery, about, “*she’s not wearing any clothes, and if she’s out here tonight, and the temperature really drops...*”)

“So...” Stiles drags. There’s still an anxious edge to his voice, but he’s less startled now, like he’s solidified with the presence of clues, with a mystery they can solve. “She definitely didn’t *plan* to leave.”

“No,” Isaac says. “Which means: she’s either in the middle of a premonition *or* someone took her.”

He hurts to have to say it, to have to put that reality to words, but it’s the truth. Those are the two options, and, right now, Isaac can’t decide which is worse.

A premonition means Lydia is unaware of her surroundings. It means she’s stuck and lost within her own mind. It means she’s predicting something horrible, following a trail that no one else can sense.

But someone *taking* her means there’s something more sinister at play here. It means someone has plans for her. It means she could be anywhere with anyone. It means she could already be hurt.

“Pass me her shirt,” Isaac says quickly.

Stiles does, grabbing the sweater and throwing it across the room with an uncharacteristic grace and coordination. It sails directly into Isaac’s hands and he brings it promptly to his nose.

He knows Lydia’s scent well enough by now that he doesn’t really *need* the boost, but it’s something of an advantage, something that can help push this forward. So, he sinks his nose into the soft fabric, breathes past detergent to the heart of the scent – floral perfume, a light tinge of sweat, and something uniquely *her*.

“Got it,” Isaac says.

The scent perforates throughout the hospital room, but, as they step out into the hallway, Isaac senses it split off. He follows the trail and Stiles follows him, rounding down the hallway and back down the stairs.

When they reach the main floor of the hospital, the trail forks.

“What’s wrong?” Stiles asks as Isaac comes to a stilted stop.

“There’s two trails,” Isaac whispers. One that leads further into the hospital. And a second that disappears towards the exit.

Isaac instantly knows which is going to lead to the final destination. Call it a premonition of his own or an understanding of the ways of fate, but he knows the trail towards the exit is the most recent, the one they’re ultimately going to have to follow.

But they can’t leave the other unchecked. If Lydia explored the hospital, then so will they. Because there could be clues or information waiting for them, something vital to help speed this along or explain Lydia’s disappearance.

And so, Isaac turns right and, again, Stiles follows him.

It gets a little messy in the more crowded parts of the hospital, more difficult to track the unique flavor of Lydia and the footsteps left in melting sand. It’s more difficult, but not impossible. Isaac just has to focus a little harder, just has to pay a little more attention to the sweetness of her scent, the way it tickles at his nose.

Isaac leads them through the hospital and to the double doors of the morgue. He wants to be surprised by the development, but he can’t honestly say that he is. If anything, this feels so... *typical*.

Isaac and Stiles share a concerned and quiet glance. And then, they push through the doors and into the room of metal drawers.

There’s only one drawer that’s open. The body of the hellhound lays on the metal surface. There’s nothing else in the room, there’s no other lines of Lydia’s scent. It’s just the body and the aching reminder of the connection between banshee and hellhound, between two harbingers of death.

“Follow the other trail?” Stiles guesses.

“Follow the other trail,” Isaac confirms.

—

They ride in the Jeep with the windows rolled down, Stiles driving while Isaac sticks his head halfway out the car. It feels completely

ridiculous and he thinks there must be a better, less embarrassing way to do this, but now isn't really the time to be innovative. Now is the time to be desperate and shameless and to *find* Lydia.

They track her scent all the way to the edge of the woods where they abandon the Jeep and get to walking. Stiles looks like he's itching to run, but Isaac only allows a brisk walk. He doesn't want to miss anything or lose the trail now, not when they're so close. Isaac can feel it in his bones, this connection of pack and this knowledge of proximity that can't be explained or understood.

They trace the trail over messy fall leaves and under low hanging branches. They weave in and out of clearings and past large boulders. They walk and walk and walk until a structure comes into view.

It's a building made of metal surrounded by a chain link fence and a barrier of fear. It hits them as they approach, like a wave of terror washing over them and dousing them with cold. It feels like Isaac is wading through water, like his movements are slowed and clumsy.

"It's the anuk-ite," Stiles whispers, but Isaac already knows.

Even still, this is where the trail leads. Isaac doesn't care about being scared if it means finding Lydia, if it means protecting her, if it means saving her. And Stiles must feel the same because they push through the sticky bubble-gum fear and through the plastic sheets for doors.

They find not only Lydia, but Scott, Malia, and Derek too. The whole pack is somehow gathered in an abandoned building in the middle of the woods.

Great. This is fine. Definitely not the start to a horror movie.

Stiles gets one look at Lydia and then runs towards her, pulling her shivering and faintly blue body into his arms. It's a tight and sudden impact, the kind that makes them both grunt as Stiles releases a groaning, mumbling sort of relief of, "Oh, thank god." And, a little bit yelling, "You scared the hell out of me. You can't just do shit like that!"

Lydia's voice comes as a sardonic drawl of, "Right because I *meant* to wander into the woods barefoot." But she's smiling into his shoulder, something warm in the green of her eyes and the tight embrace.

Stiles pulls back and away from her, kisses her on the forehead and smooths his hand over her hair and down her back.

She looks up at him with a small smirk, something out of place in the situation. Then, she asks, “Well. Is anyone gonna get me a coat?”

“How did you get here?” Scott asks Lydia, once Stiles has fumbled out of his jacket and slipped it over her shoulders. She’s burying herself into the fabric a little, like she’s seeking comfort in Stiles.

“He led me,” she says, her voice a little hollow, a little less animated than before. “He wanted me to find it.”

And, somehow, Isaac knows she isn’t talking about the bodies of the Primal that lay behind them in a massacred pile of bone. They’re all dead with eye sockets blown out and flooded with spiderwebs of blood, with red dripping from their tongues and down their chins. They’re alarming, but they’re not the object of this treasure hunt.

“Who led you?” Scott questions. He takes a hesitant step towards Lydia, like she’s a wild thing that he’s scared to spook, like she’s something dangerous. And, Isaac thinks, she sort of is.

Lydia’s answer comes in the form of one word, one simple name of, “Halwyn.”

And so, together, they traipse through the woods, using flashlights and night vision for sight and following nothing more than Lydia’s intuition. Her bare feet rustle over leaves as she leads the way. It stirs something uncomfortable and nervous in Isaac’s chest, something that reacts instinctively to the vulnerability of this exposure.

“Why would a dead hellhound bring you here?” Malia asks. And, “Also, isn’t he dead?”

Lydia slows her pace just a little, looking briefly over her shoulder at Malia. She gives a slight tilt to her chin, a sideways twist of her lips, “I guess the connection between a banshee and a hellhound—”

“Dead hellhound,”

“—is stronger than I thought,” Lydia says, speaking over Malia and paying no mind to her interruptions or protests. “As for the why... I’m hoping if I find the body, I’ll figure that part out.”

“Did you not notice the giant *pile* of dead bodies back there?” Stiles asks, turning his cheek a little to gaze almost longingly in the

direction of the known, the bodies they'd already discovered.

"It's a different body," Lydia says without missing a step.

Stiles sighs, mumbling, "Oh, great. *Another* body. Just what we need."

This time, Malia is the one ignoring his interruption, saying, "There's not another body out here. I'd smell it."

She has a point. Isaac can't smell that overarching darkness of death, that sour note and scraping wrongness. He can't smell wet dirt or rot. He just smells the fresh woods of the forest and the familiarity of pack.

But, then again, Isaac knows better than to doubt a banshee, especially when that banshee is none other than Lydia Martin.

"I'm a harbinger of death," she says. "Trust me."

And they do. They follow her deeper into the woods, further away from the abandoned building and the edge of the preserve where the Jeep is parked. They follow her quiet padding footsteps as she leads them down a magnetic trail, a connection only she can sense, an invisible string tied tight between her and Halwyn and whatever body lies ahead.

They follow Lydia until a clearing opens up and their leaf strewn path turns to a faceless body. It's the same as the one found in the school, the one that showed up in the tunnels the day of the peace summit, the one that Parrish tried to burn into nonexistence.

Lydia kneels down by the head of the skinless corpse. Her eyes trace over the lines of muscle and the melted away features of humanity.

"How is this possible?" Stiles asks. "We *saw* Parrish kill it."

They were all there. They all watched as the flare connected with Parrish, as he turned to a harsh flame that swallowed them both, that transformed the body into char.

"This one's different," Lydia says, like the truth of it is just there. She doesn't have to strain for the knowledge or make a wild guess, it's just *fact* and she just *knows*.

"Yeah," Scott drags, "I think Lydia's right. I think this is part of the pack."

He reaches for the bare arm of the body, lifts it to the light so they can see the shape of the pack symbol burned past flesh and into muscle. It's a circle with a crescent on top.

"Its skin is gone," Lydia says. It's an obvious observation, but it's also a question. It's a wondering of how the symbol can still be seen, how it didn't disappear with the rest of the body's flesh.

"Wolves have to burn tattoos into their skin," Scott says. He glances to Derek when he says it, likely remembering that day in the ruins of the Hale house. "My tattoo is probably scarred into my muscle too."

"Oh, that's so gross," Stiles whispers.

Isaac thinks he should probably agree, but there's something appealing about the permanence. There's something intriguing about how deep the ink runs, how knotted and intertwined Scott is with his pack symbol, how he couldn't separate from it even if he tried.

"Okay, but how are there two of these bodies?" Malia asks, redirecting their conversation back to the crux of the issue.

"Because the anuk-ite has two faces," Lydia says. Again, it's like the answer comes from deep within her, like it's been there the whole time, they just hadn't managed to unlock it yet.

"That's why Halwyn sent you here," Scott says, a realization blooming in his eyes as the epiphany stretches into something tangible and sure.

"He wanted me to find the anuk-ite's other face," Lydia finishes.

Meaning: whoever this person once was, whoever this body used to belong to, *they're* the second half of the anuk-ite.

—

The freezer in the back of the school's cafeteria is full of bodies – Isaac counts at least four – that all have the same injuries as the pack found in the woods. Their eyes are gone and turned to weepings of red blood, skin going blue and frosty with time and the cold of the ice box.

"It's a bad day for finding bodies," Malia says as they slam the lid closed once more.

“There’s gonna be a lot more if we don’t find Aaron’s other half,” Liam says. Because, apparently, he and Theo have figured out who the first side of the anuk-ite is: a freshman who was trying out for the lacrosse team, a kid with no previous link to the supernatural, an innocent in the wrong place at the wrong time. And, now, he’s just gone. Now, his body has been taken over by a creature of fear.

It sounds too familiar to Isaac’s ears, too much for him to handle in the cramped space of the back room and the quiet darkness of the night air.

(Distantly, though, Isaac feels some gratitude in the fact that Stiles isn’t here, that he isn’t hearing this in such a public space, that he chose to take Lydia home instead of joining them.)

“Which, we know nothing about,” Theo says, pessimistic as ever.

“We do know one thing,” Scott corrects. “We know it’s a werewolf.”

And it’s not much, but it is something to go off of. Isaac really wishes they had latched onto Stiles’ joking talks of a supernatural census, wishes the pages of the dead pool hadn’t been burned and destroyed. Because they could really use that database right now, they could really benefit from that knowledge.

“We need to find this werewolf right now,” Liam urges.

“Preferably,” Theo drawls, “*before* they merge.”

There’s something pointed there, something not quite knowing, but not far off from it either. Isaac can only cross his fingers and hope that Theo isn’t keeping information from them this time, that it’s just the bias inside himself seeing things that aren’t really there.

“What happens when they merge?” Malia asks, looking past Scott’s shoulder and over to Theo and Liam.

They both give small shrugs, and, somehow, that brings the attention over to Isaac. Everyone in the room turns to look at him, like he’s the one that’s supposed to know this. And maybe he is, maybe he is the one with the research tendencies, but he hasn’t gotten a chance to dive deeper into the anuk-ite. He doesn’t know anything more than the rest of them and he shares that willingly.

“I don’t know,” he says, maybe a little combative. “But I got a feeling that it’s not going to be good.”

Liam takes a step closer to Scott, sounding almost nervous when he says, “Any chance you, uh, put together that army, Scott?”

Malia answers with a truthful, but harsh sort of, “You’re looking at it.”

It’s almost like she’s daring Liam to complain about it, like she’s daring him to say something negative, something to dash any and all hopes of success.

Liam doesn’t get a chance to say anything at all though because, in that moment, a familiar voice comes from the door, an enunciated and taunting, “Let’s hope this *thing* doesn’t feed on desperation because this room *reeks* of it.”

They turn in tandem to see Peter standing in the doorway. His hair is puffed up at the strangest angles and his skin is tinted black with char and ash. (Isaac stifles an amused and secretly pleased grin behind his hand.)

“What happened?” Scott asks, no lack of sincerity or concern in his voice.

Peter holds up a similarly burnt steering wheel. “The hunters,” his voice goes quiet and despondent, “destroyed my perfect automobile.” He drops the wheel back to his side and looks at Malia when he says, “So, if this thing had anything to do with it, I’d like to see that its demise is... *appropriately* painful.”

Peter slams the steering wheel down onto the nearest surface with a definitive sort of thump of, *I’m in*.

“I thought you had two cars?” Malia asks, slow and quiet.

Peter’s neck snaps towards her once more as he holds up a second similarly charred car part. He drops it to the ground with a fainter clatter than the first and announces, sure and certain, “There’s going to be *hell* to pay.”

Isaac glances over at Derek and gets only a roll of his eyes in explanation.

Well, okay then.

—

The loft is quiet, but not silent. Isaac can still hear Derek’s heavy

breathing downstairs, can still hear his heartbeat slowing as he drifts into sleep. The loft is dark, but not lightless. Isaac can still see the shine of the moon across the floor, can still see the twinkling of stars through the window. The loft is bare, but not empty. Isaac can still feel his bed beneath him, can still feel the pillow under his head.

Isaac should be sleeping. The day was long and his couple hours of napping on the McCall couch certainly won't be enough to sustain him. But, still, he stares up at the ceiling and doesn't drift away.

As the minutes creep by, his phone starts to ring. Isaac wasn't expecting it, but he knows who it is and he answers without checking, "Hi, Scott."

"Hey, Isaac," Scott says. His voice sounds soft and warm, a welcome familiarity to Isaac's ears. *"Judging by how quickly you answered, I'm guessing I didn't wake you?"*

"No," Isaac says quietly, whispering only a little and hoping that Derek has had enough practice with their talking to sleep through the conversation. "I wasn't asleep yet. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I guess. Mom's still at the hospital and the house feels empty. I just – I wanted to hear your voice."

"Oh," Isaac answers. Because he understands that. He recognizes how dull the loft gets whenever Derek isn't around, how it feels vacant and wrong without him. He says, silly and stupid, "Well, here it is."

Scott breathes a soft laugh. *"I feel better already."*

And Isaac knows it's meant to be a joke, but he can sense the honesty there. He can feel it vibrating through the speaker and into his hand. He says, simply, "Good."

"Things are probably about to become really crazy, aren't they?"

"Become?" Isaac parrots, a little incredulous, but it's more disingenuous than not. It's an attempt to diffuse the tension with bad humor and ridiculous tones of voice.

"All right, yeah, fair," Scott says. *"It's already bad, but... it's going to get worse now."*

It's not a question this time. It's a definitive and objective fact. Isaac knows it's true, knows there's no denying that the stakes are about to

rise, that the timeline of events is about to be a muddled whirlwind of adventure.

“Yeah, it’s gonna suck,” Isaac admits. Because there’s no point in lying or sugar-coating it with Scott. Instead, he just says, “But, for tonight, let’s just sleep. Okay?”

“Okay,” Scott says. And, “*Can you stay on the line?*”

“Of course,” Isaac answers. He says, “Good night, superstar.”

Scott laughs and Isaac can imagine his smile as he says, “Good night, Iz.”

Then, Isaac puts his phone on speaker and sets it on his chest. He lets the thrum of Scott’s breathing seep into his skin, lets it soothe his sharp edges and melt his ribs and warm his joints. He lets the sound bleed into him, lets it fill him with *Scott*.

And he falls asleep to the steady beat of his heart.

Genotype

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 18

Word count: 6,545

Isaac wakes with his phone lying on the bed beside him and the line gone quiet and dead. He's not surprised, but he is getting closer and closer to asking Scott how he always manages to do that.

For now, he brushes it aside and rolls out of bed and down the spiral staircase. There, he finds Derek clothed for the day with a bag slung up over his shoulder. Isaac immediately feels under dressed in his pajamas with his curls sticking up in every direction, but, more importantly, he feels a flash of anxiety behind his ribs, a steady thrum of, "What's going on?"

Derek gives him a sympathetic smile and gestures towards the couch, saying, "We need to talk about what's next."

Isaac still feels a little groggy, still in that between state of sleep and rest, so he follows instructions without protest. He sits back against the couch, nuzzles into the cushions and forces himself *not* to slip back into unconsciousness.

"I have to leave town for a couple days to track down Braeden," Derek says, definitive and not asking permission. Instantly, Isaac feels more awake. Instantly, his eyes widen and his heart skips a beat. Derek must see, hear, sense this because he tacks on, "I already have a lead and you and I both know we need more help around here."

He's right, of course, but it doesn't make the prospect any less nerve-racking. Deep down, Isaac knows it's a *selfish* sort of fear. Because he knows, logically, that leaving Beacon Hills is safer than staying is. Logically, he knows that Derek leaving will take him out of the direct line of fire for a few days. But, still, he doesn't want to let him out of his sight, doesn't want to watch him walk away, doesn't want to do this without him.

"She's a skilled fighter and she's been attacked by the supernatural more than once. We *need* her perspective," Derek says, like he's still trying to convince Isaac. It's like, he's not asking for permission, but

he still *wants* Isaac's approval anyway.

And Isaac has to give it to him. Because it's only fair. Because he's *right*.

"Okay," Isaac says. And, "You're leaving right now?"

Derek gives him a proud sort of look, a gentle smile and something grateful underneath. He puts a hand on Isaac's shoulder, squeezing with a firm grip. There's an anchoring in that hold, something pinning Isaac's body and mind together, preventing them from separating and swirling aimlessly.

"Not right this second," Derek says. "I needed to talk to you about something else first."

Isaac quirks his head to one side, but doesn't answer with words. Instead, he just waits for Derek to say whatever it is he has to say. (And it's a testament to Isaac's growth – to the strengthening of the bond between them – that Isaac doesn't jump right to the worst case scenario. It's a marvel that there's no fear in Isaac, just simple patience and quiet waiting.)

It takes Derek a moment to work up to it, to free the statement from behind his lips, to find the courage to express such care. But, eventually, he says, "We're at war now. Death and destruction are inevitabilities and..." Derek shakes his head. "Keep Scott safe, okay?"

It's not what Isaac was anticipating. Not in the slightest. He was expecting a warning to *be careful* or an urgency to perhaps let go of the idea of *not killing*. But this? This worry about Scott and this tangible askance of protecting him... this makes Isaac's heart melt and his body go warm.

"Yeah," Isaac says. "Yeah, always."

Derek shakes his head again, little jerking movements like maybe Isaac isn't getting this, like he isn't quite grasping the severity of this moment. "He's going to be Monroe and Gerard's number one target. He's not going to want to hurt anyone, but if that gets him killed..."

And there it is. The unspoken, *if he can't do it, then you're going to have to*.

"Derek," Isaac levels, "I'm not going to kill anyone."

“I’m not asking you to,” Derek answers back without pause.

It’s an obvious contradiction, but Isaac thinks he gets it anyway. Derek doesn’t *want* Isaac to kill anyone, doesn’t *want* it to come to that. But he’s also aware of the costs of war and he wants Isaac to be aware too. He wants Isaac to be ready and prepared, to do what needs to be done.

Isaac still doesn’t think that means murder, but Derek has always had a different view of things, has *always* seen death and destruction as inevitabilities – and, actually, maybe Isaac has too. Maybe this is the first time in a long time that they aren’t seeing exactly eye to eye.

It doesn’t end in broken bones this time though. Instead, it ends in a hug and Derek’s hand ruffling his hair and a decidedly non-goodbye.

“Hey, it’s me again. I, uh, don’t know why you can’t seem to call me back. Maybe it’s because you think you’re punishing me, but this is too long. It – It – It’s too much. And it’s not about us. Something’s happening in Beacon Hills, to the people here. I just... I just need to know everyone there with you is okay, so can you just please call me? Please. One call is all I’m asking for, and if you can’t call me back, then... I’m going to get my answer anyway. That means I’m coming up there myself. If I don’t get a call from you, I’m coming up there. So just try – try to remember: it’s my pack too.”

There’s a steady beep and then the voicemail comes to an end. Scott grabs the phone and flips it closed, signally that he’s not going to play it again – they’ve already listened to it three times through, but it’s not getting any clearer. Isaac still doesn’t recognize the voice and no one else seems to either.

“You pulled this off one of the bodies in the woods?” Theo confirms from where he’s leaning against the glass door of the animal clinic. (Isaac doesn’t know who asked him to come, doesn’t know what help he’s going to be, but he knows he feels a weight in his chest when he looks at him. Something new, something *strange*.)

A look passes between Scott and Liam, almost like they’re assessing what information to share, almost like they’re sizing Theo up. Then, the latter is answering with, “Malia did.”

“Yeah, there were six dead bodies,” Scott explains. And, “One of them had no face.”

“Okay,” Theo says, walking away from the door and over to the half wall dividing the waiting room and the actual clinic of the vet. And, surprisingly, Isaac doesn’t bristle at the proximity, doesn’t feel that usual shiver down his spine. He just listens as Theo asks, “So, the one with no face, you think that’s the woman on the phone?”

Scott drops back against one of the wooden tables, gives a slight shake of his head and a gesticulation of the phone in his hand, only manages enough certainty to say, “Maybe.”

It sounds like a question to Isaac’s ears. Because there’s still so much they don’t know. There’s still so much that they don’t understand about this voicemail and about this pack and about how the anuk-ite functions.

“It’s the same thing that happened to Aaron,” Mason says, sitting up a little straighter as things start to connect and make more sense to him. He’s got that usual enthusiasm about him, that usual blinding optimism. “It took over his body, basically *stole* his face and his DNA.” Mason gets up and starts to pace, walking past Theo and past Scott. “So that means, whoever this woman is, she could be the other *half* of the anuk-ite.”

“Which means she’s just half of the problem,” Theo says before the words have really gotten a chance to sink in. “The other half we already know about.” He gestures towards Liam, towards their recent joint discovery of, “Aaron.”

“We don’t know where he is though,” Liam counters.

“Okay, hold on,” Theo says. He gets this wild sort of intensity about him, “Aren’t we supposed to keep both halves apart?” His eyes flick from Liam over to Isaac. “If we know about one half, let’s just go for that one – that’s Aaron.”

Since one risk is known and the other is unknown...

“I’m *not* agreeing with Theo,” Mason says, taking a step closer to him, “but I do think it’d be easier to track down Aaron over a voice on a phone.”

“*That’s* agreeing with Theo,” Liam says with a grimacing wince and a frustrated sort of point towards Mason.

“Yeah,” Mason shrugs, tilting his head casually, “but I thought I’d try to... soften the blow a bit.”

Theo, from where he's pressing his hands against the half wall, turns to look at Mason with something sort of offended in the crinkle of his brows. He pulls back from his resting place, standing up straight with eyes searching the group. He gives an indignant, "Is everyone completely shocked that I might be right?"

"No," Isaac answers, mumbling a little, "we just don't like it."

"Maybe we're all right," Scott says. He's looking at Isaac as the words come to light. It's easy to recognize the insinuation there, the reminder of where they went wrong when Theo was their greatest enemy, the reminder of their repeated mistake, of something they've said more than once. *They should have done both.* And now it's time to learn from the missteps. "Maybe we should be looking for both. Aaron *and* the woman on the phone."

He's looking to Isaac like he's looking for his approval, and Isaac gives it in a firm nod of his head and slight twitching of his lips.

And so, Scott turns over to Mason and Theo with, "Since you guys agree..."

"Wait," Mason says the moment the implication hits, eyes going a little wide, "you mean... me and-?"

"-him?" Theo finishes the sentence, eyes just as nervous and just as hesitant.

"Yeah," Scott answers, like there's nothing concerning about this at all, like Theo didn't directly lead to Mason being temporarily taken over by a five hundred year old French guy. "You two," he says with a pointed nod, "find Aaron. Liam, Isaac, and I will try to figure out whose voice is on the phone."

Isaac briefly considers offering to go with Mason and Theo. Mostly because of the look on Mason's face and the genuine fear that seems to be growing inside him. But then, he remembers Deucalion and his advice of, "*lower than me.*" And then, he looks at Theo and sees something intriguing under the surface – something almost *scorned*. And, in that moment, Isaac decides to give him a sprig of trust, not quite an olive branch, but not too far from it either.

Instead of offering to go with them, he offers Mason a reassuring glance. Their eyes meet and Isaac imbues the blue of his irises with as much surety as he can muster, like he's trying to silently tell Mason that, *it's okay, you'll be fine.*

And Isaac really believes it too.

“If we find either half,” Liam says, staring down at the phone he had at some point taken from Scott, “maybe we don’t have to fight at all.” He looks up then, strength blooming in the set of his shoulders, “Stop the anuk-ite...”

“Stop the war.”

Liam mindlessly spins the phone on the surface of the metal table. It turns in easy circles, creating a quiet scraping noise as it goes. Until Scott cups his hand over it, putting the movement to rest.

Scott presses up from where he had been leaning and starts to walk away, like maybe, if he gets some distance between himself and the phone, then he’ll come back with clarity. Isaac’s pretty sure that’s not going to work, but he lets Scott do it anyway. Because, at this rate, they’re all getting frustrated.

At this rate, Isaac could recite the entire voicemail from memory, but they aren’t any closer to discovering the identity of the voice. They aren’t any closer to finding the anuk-ite’s other half.

Without any deliberation, Liam takes matters into his own hands and starts to dial the number.

Scott snatches the phone from him before it’s answered, giving a half silent, “*whoa*.” And, louder but still mostly a whisper, “Do you even know what you’re going to say?”

“Hello?” Liam says, like it’s obvious.

Isaac bites his lip to keep from laughing at the obvious simplicity of it, at the way Liam is still that same endearing kid even after everything they’ve endured together. (Liam definitely notices his failed attempts at subtlety, fixing Isaac with a glare and heat behind his eyes. Isaac only smiles innocently in response.)

“We might only get one shot at this,” Scott says, ignoring the silent exchange passing between Liam and Isaac. He tests, “What are you going to tell her?”

Liam drops his glare and drops his head, staring more at the phone in Scott’s hand than anything else. “I’m gonna try to get her to meet us

somewhere.”

“That might not be the best idea,” Isaac says quietly, not trying to put a damper on Liam’s determination, but trying to keep them all safe.

“Why?” Liam answers, contrarian and stubborn. “Then we’ll know who they are.”

“And they’ll know who we are,” Scott says, easily stealing the words right from Isaac’s mind.

But, just as the sentence has been brought to life, the phone starts to ring in Scott’s hand. His eyes go wide and he looks like he wants to throw it across the room.

“Answer it,” Liam urges because that seems to be the only option now, because the choice has been taken from them, the decision made for them.

“You’re the one who wanted to make the call, you take it,” Scott says. And it strikes Isaac as a little ridiculous, the way Scott is passing off the burden onto his younger beta. It reminds him of a sibling-like squabbling.

Liam takes the phone from Scott’s grip just as the ringing turns to silence. He opens the flip phone and looks briefly at the screen, like he’s begging it to reveal its secrets, like he’s imploring to an inanimate object. Then, he flicks his eyes to Isaac and to Scott. There’s a question there, a wondering if they should – or if they even *could* – back out now.

Scott gives him a small nod, and that’s all it takes for Liam to dial again. He sets the phone on speaker, places it in the center of the metal table, and then they wait.

The line rings three times before it clicks on with a static crackle and a male voice of, “*Beacon Hills high school, how can–*”

Liam slams the phone shut and disconnects the line before another word can be said.

“It’s someone at school,” Liam announces.

“We might know who they are,” Scott says, eyebrows lifting with the possibilities.

The suspects suddenly narrow down to a finite number of options. Suddenly, they have direction and a place to start. And, somehow, that's all they really need.

Because Liam is staring down at the phone in his hand, but his attention is elsewhere. His irises flicker a little, side to side like he's thinking or remembering something. And then he's playing the voicemail once more, holding it up to his ear to listen with intent and uninterrupted focus.

He paces, turning his back to Scott, like he actually does need space to connect the dots that are forming in his mind.

"Liam?" Scott calls quietly. And when he doesn't answer, he repeats, a little louder, "Liam?"

Liam turns on his heel and says, blue eyes shining, "I think I know who it is."

"Who?" Scott asks, taking a quick step towards Liam.

"Mrs. Finch."

Isaac recognizes the name, knows Scott took her class in senior year, but he's too distracted to try to remember what she looked like, to try to place her in his mind.

Because an object across the room has caught his eye.

It shouldn't. It's drab in appearance and it nearly blends into the floor where it's resting, but Isaac finds himself stepping towards it anyway. He ignores the conversation happening between Scott and Liam, opting instead to pick up the slab taken from Eichen House, the slab with the drawing of the anuk-ite – the two pieces only put together because of Corey, because of things he can see that no one else can.

"Isaac?" Scott calls, soft and concerned.

Isaac holds the heavy slab in his hand and looks over his shoulder, "I think we should talk to Corey."

—

There's a bit of a discussion over what's more important – finding the two halves or figuring out how to stop them once they do. There's a bit of a discussion over where their priorities should lie – in Liam's

hunch or in Isaac's. But, eventually, they make it onto the same page. It's the same sentiment as before, the same idea of, *we should be doing both*.

And so, while Scott and Liam set off to find Mrs. Finch at the high school, Isaac plans to hang back at the animal clinic and wait for Corey's arrival.

Scott settles a hand on the side of Isaac's jaw (and he's distinctly aware of Liam fake gagging in the background, but too enchanted by Scott's eyes to *really* care). "Be careful, yeah?"

Isaac laughs a little on his name, on an exhale of, "Scott." And, "I'm just going to be talking to Corey. I should be telling *you* to be careful."

Scott smiles, flushing a little, whispers, "Well. Go on then."

Isaac rolls his eyes at Scott's antics, kisses him briefly, and says just as quietly, "Be careful."

"We'll do our very best," Liam says, way too loud for the small space and the soft atmosphere they've crafted. Then, complaining, "Come on, Scott. Let's go. You can kiss your boyfriend after we save the world."

Isaac flips Liam off over Scott's shoulder as he kisses him again, a little longer this time, just for the sake of messing with the grumpy beta.

Liam groans loudly and Isaac laughs uninhibited, and then Scott is detaching himself from Isaac's arms with an amused kind of smile and a shake of his head as if to say, *I can't believe you*.

Isaac waves sweetly and watches as they go, watches as they leave the animal clinic with nothing more than a ding of the bell overhead.

—

Isaac waits for Corey, spending the stretching minutes trying to remember every piece of the puzzle they've gained so far. They know the anuk-ite was trapped in the Wild Hunt, they know it uses fear to split communities apart, they know that it feeds off that chaos, they know it's made up of two halves, they know one side is supernatural and the other is human.

They know so much, but also so little.

Isaac really wishes Stiles was here. They usually do such a good job at bouncing ideas off each other, at covering each other's blindspots. But, right now, Stiles is at the hospital with Lydia and Malia trying to figure out if Halwyn is really dead. And, right now, Isaac knows that Stiles won't be leaving Lydia's side today.

So, Isaac's going to have to do this on his own. Or, well, he's going to have to do this with Corey.

At that moment, as if cued by Isaac's thoughts, the bell dings again and the door of the vet clinic opens as Corey walks inside. "Hey," he says, pushing through the gate and through to the back room, "you wanted my help?"

"Yeah," Isaac says. "I'm trying to figure out how to stop the anuk-ite, and since it was trapped in the Hunt and you're part Ghost Rider... I thought maybe you'd be part of the solution."

Corey scrunches up his nose a little. "Okay..." he drags out in his confusion, "but you do realize that everything I know about my powers, I know because of you, right? How – How am I supposed to help?"

Isaac shrugs a little bit. "I really feel like I should have an answer for you since this was my idea *but*."

Corey gives a half-aborted laugh. And, "You know, when we first met, I thought you were this slightly intimidating and very intelligent person. Now, I'm realizing that you're just winging it. All the time."

Isaac glares at him, but it's weak as the amusement takes over. He merely rolls his eyes and says, "Yeah, yeah, whatever. Just – help me?"

"Yeah, all right," Corey says, but he still sounds entirely unsure about the whole thing. "Where do we start?"

"Well," Isaac shrugs again, "we know that the anuk-ite is an ancient shapeshifter that turns people against each other." He thinks it over for a minute. "I mean, the cheesy part of my brain is telling me there could be something in that, in finding a united front and not *allowing* the anuk-ite to *create* the disharmony, but I don't know. I think we're already too far gone for that kind of approach."

"You've been spending too much time with Scott," Corey says, laughing more heartily than Isaac really thinks is fair.

In response, he shoves Corey in the shoulder and mumbles, “Shut up.”

Corey stumbles a little, but just laughs harder and, “What! That sounds like something directly out of a Disney movie. Like. Be serious here.”

Isaac ignores him, if only because he’s right. Unfortunately, the power of love and Scott McCall’s smile just isn’t going to be enough to stop the full fledged war that’s unraveling.

And so, Isaac switches gears a little and says, “We also know that Halwyn trapped the anuk-ite in the Wild Hunt for centuries.”

“That’s why you think I can somehow help?” Corey clarifies.

Isaac nods. “I mean, we haven’t really explored in depth what it means for you to be part Ghost Rider and what sort of abilities that could unlock.” He sighs, “But I also don’t know that we have the time to do *any* of that when there’s no *guarantee* that you actually are the solution.”

Corey frowns a little at that, but just says, “Well, I’m not the only one with a connection to the Wild Hunt.” And, unnecessarily, “I mean, Halwyn – the last person that succeeded in defeating the anuk-ite – is a hellhound. So, maybe we should call on another.”

Isaac smiles at Corey, bright and unfiltered. He says, “See. I knew you could help.”

Parrish joins them at the animal clinic a good half hour later, coming in with apologies for how long it took and a frazzled wrinkle to the collar of his shirt. He smooths it out, instead letting the wrinkle form between his brows as he asks, “So. You said you needed my help?”

Isaac has a momentary spark of gratitude for Parrish, for the way he always comes rushing when one of them calls. Even when he pretends to drag his feet, even when he’s uncertain, he trusts that they wouldn’t ask for his assistance unless it was necessary or serious, unless they really need him. It’s nice – the way he’s a certified adult, but still has so much faith in a bunch of teenagers.

He always shows up, and it’s made even more meaningful considering the context of the last time Isaac and Parrish saw each other, the fact that it was, inarguably, not a great day for either of them. Neither one

was at their best, but Parrish doesn't hold a grudge, just walks through the door with an open mind and an open heart.

"Yeah," Isaac says. "We've been trying to figure out how to stop the anuk-ite, and all our ideas lead towards you being part of the solution."

"Me?" Parrish reiterates, eyebrows furrowing even further as the genuine confusion takes over.

"Well, we know Halwyn – a hellhound – stopped the anuk-ite before by trapping it in the Wild Hunt. And you're a hellhound and also connected to the Hunt so..." Corey trails off, like the insinuations there are obvious enough. And, truthfully, they are.

Isaac adds, "Also, you're the only one who was able to touch the anuk-ite in the tunnels. That has to mean something, right?"

Parrish gives a one shouldered shrug, "I have no idea what that means."

Isaac pouts a little, but he's not entirely surprised. He certainly didn't expect Parrish to swoop in with all the answers, didn't expect him to be hoarding the perfect solution up until this moment. All he really hoped for was some support and an extra set of hands, an extra set of eyes to rove over the information they already have, an extra perspective to bring some answers to life.

"But," Isaac stretches the vowel, "you'll help us figure it out, right?"

Parrish sighs and glances over his shoulder, like he sort of regrets walking through the door. But, inevitably and eventually, he just says, "Yeah. All right."

Isaac smiles at him.

—

They end up flipping through one of the books Deaton has that mentions the anuk-ite. They're searching for mentions of Ghost Riders or the Wild Hunt or hellhounds, but, in the end, they find something else entirely.

If the two halves merge, if you see the anuk-ite in its true form, then you are already gone.

Reading over those words, Isaac feels a tantalizing shiver of familiarity, a teasing chill of parallel lines. He flashes back to, “*those who see the Wild Hunt beware, for you are already lost.*” It sends a ripple of fear down Isaac’s spine and he wants nothing more than to block out the memories – of Stiles and thundering clouds and men on horseback. He wants nothing more than to slam the book shut.

But, despite the discomfort, that reminder is the final push Isaac needs into something of an epiphany, something that feels like the first ounce of headway.

“What if this is literal?” Isaac asks, pointing to the line on the page, dragging his finger under the set of nineteen words. He looks up at Parrish and Corey, eyes flitting between them, “I mean, what if it’s not a ‘it’s so powerful when it’s merged that you’re basically screwed’ thing? What if it means that literally? That you *literally can’t* look at it without being killed?”

“You think so?” Parrish asks, sounding a little unsure, but like he’s considering the possibility anyway.

Isaac runs a hand through his hair, a fluid movement turned into a forward gesture as his fingers push past the slight knot in his curls. “It makes sense. Doesn’t it?”

Parrish’s mouth twists to one side, brows lowering as if he’s not entirely convinced.

Corey is the one that comes to Isaac’s defense, that jumps onto the theory with an analysis of his own. “It’s weird,” he says. “The entire passage is speaking directly about the anuk-ite. It’s only in the last line that they address the reader. It seems like – like a *warning*.”

Isaac nods a little rapidly, adds, “The word choice is too pointed to be accidental. It *has* to mean something.”

“Okay,” Parrish says, as if he’s willing to accept the idea for now, like he’s letting them run with it for a moment. “But how does that help us stop the anuk-ite?”

“It doesn’t,” Isaac says quickly. He rambles in a way that reminds him of Stiles, “It actually makes the entire thing so much more complicated, but that’s... that’s the least of our worries right now.”

“Why?”

“Because Mason and Theo and Liam and Scott have just gone looking for the two halves of the anuk-ite, and they have no idea that they can’t look at it,” Isaac answers, all in one heaving breath and one sudden jolt of fear. The words are flying out of his mouth before his mind has really wrapped around them, but, once they’re floating in the air between them, the terror settles heavy on his shoulders.

He remembers this morning, remembers Derek’s non-goodbye and his one request of Isaac, his one request to keep Scott safe. And, now, only a handful of hours later, Isaac’s already failing him.

“Where are they?” Parrish asks, placing a steadying hand on Isaac’s shoulder, like he’s trying to force his feet back to the ground, force his mind back into reality.

“Uh,” Isaac says, voice trembling a little. “Mason and Theo went down to the tunnels, and Scott and Liam went to the school.”

“So, we’ll split up and we’ll warn them,” Parrish says without hesitation. And, gently reassuring, “It’s going to be okay.”

“Sorry,” Corey interrupts a little, not sounding at all apologetic. “But Mason is with *Theo*? Who the *hell* signed off on that idea? He’s going to abandon Mason and save his own ass the *second* he gets a chance!”

Isaac doesn’t know if that’s true. He doesn’t know if Theo would really betray them now, but he knows why Corey thinks it. He knows what Theo put Corey through, what he put Mason through, what he put them all through.

And he also knows that it’s his fault. He let Mason and Theo go alone, despite knowing that it was a *risk*, that it was something of a test of trust. He knows that Mason and Theo are more vulnerable than Liam and Scott are right now, and he knows that it’s, at least partially, his fault.

So, as much as Isaac wants to run off after Scott and save his life, as much as he wants to follow through on his promise to Derek, he knows that he can’t. He knows what he has to do.

“They’re going to be fine,” Isaac tells Corey. “You and I will warn them, and,” turning to the deputy, “Jordan, you can go warn Scott and Liam?”

There’s something pleading in his voice, something so obviously aching and uncomfortable and scared.

“I’ll make sure Scott is safe,” Parrish says. There’s a weight to his words and Isaac’s certain that they’re both thinking about Camden. It feels like swearing on that memory, on that boy that lives on in both their minds – their *hearts* – but neither says a word of the joint loss between them.

Instead, Isaac just nods and hopes beyond hope that he can count on Parrish the way he thinks he can.

Isaac and Corey race down to the tunnels. They sprint down piped hallways and around sharp corners, following the trail of familiar scents until, eventually, Mason and Theo come into view. They’re both leaning against one wall, similarly banged up and exhausted, but not killed by a look and not separated by betrayal.

“He was here,” Theo says, grunting as Corey runs straight to Mason and starts leeching pain through his skin. Isaac didn’t know Corey knew how to do that, but maybe he didn’t before now, maybe it’s a heat of the moment type of learning, something in the desperation of caring.

“Who? Aaron?” Isaac asks. He doesn’t take Theo’s pain, but he does take his hand and help him to his feet. (The still angry part of Isaac – the part of him that might not ever stop burning – wants to let him go and drop him to the ground, but he doesn’t give into the vindictive instinct.)

Theo bats his hand away as soon as he’s standing, says, “Yeah. He attacked us, but then he just... he just ran off. I think – I think he was following some sort of howl from his other half.”

Isaac’s blood runs cold with fear for Scott and for Liam, but he doesn’t let it take him over. He focuses instead on this present moment before them, the people in this tunnel with him and the conundrum of their circumstances. He focuses on the recent revelation, says, “We figured something out. When the two halves merge, the anuk-ite can kill you with a look.”

Theo frowns and scoffs a little, “Well, that’s great.”

Isaac nods, smiles only faintly. He turns his attention away from Theo for a moment – seeing as his sarcasm is still intact so he must be all right – and focuses on Mason. He asks him softly, “You okay?”

Mason looks up at Isaac and gives a weak sort of thumbs up and a goofy, “Just peachy.”

Isaac laughs and Corey does a little too, stopping in his drinking of pain to help bring Mason up to standing. And, once they’re all steady on their feet, together, the four of them trace their way back through the tunnels and up to the surface.

Isaac recognizes Theo’s truck parked not far from the Jeep and, in a lapse of judgment and a probable mistake, he asks, quiet enough so that Mason and Corey likely won’t hear, “Where’re you going for the night?”

Theo stops in his tracks. It’s only for a second, just a momentary freezing and fumbling. Then, just as quickly, he starts walking again, a little faster this time, like he’s trying to run away. He snarks under his breath, “What? Trying to keep tabs on me?”

Isaac shrugs a little because, honestly, it wouldn’t be such a bad thing if that *was* what he was trying to do. The reality, though, is a little more genuine, a little less calculated. The reality is something almost... *worried*.

And Isaac thinks he should be more bothered by that, more pissed off by the way Theo has made him care again without even trying. But, instead, Isaac just feels traces of pity and hope that the hunters won’t find Theo in the night.

Obviously, he doesn’t say any of that, just gives a quiet, “You’d deserve it, if I was.”

For a second, something sort of wounded crosses Theo’s features. Isaac blames it on the trick of the night sky, of the twinkling glare of the moon and the stars above, and gets in the Jeep without another word.

—

At their request, Isaac drops Mason and Corey off at Mason’s house for the evening. He kind of thinks he shouldn’t. He kind of thinks they should all be sheltered up together, hunkered down and preparing for the next attack, but he lets himself be convinced otherwise. Mason says he’s going to need to get his car anyway and he promises that they’ll be safe and they’ll come as soon as they’re called. And then, Isaac remembers the last time Mason was at the McCall household and the shattered window and he loses all regret in keeping them at a safe distance for a few hours.

He says good night and pulls out of the driveway only once they're through the door and hears the lock of it click into place.

Isaac has no interest in returning to the empty loft, so he drives towards the McCall house. He keeps the windows rolled up, even though he kind of wishes he could indulge in the cleansing feeling of wind rushing over his skin like a cool breeze of clarity. Instead, he remains in the stuffy Jeep with the faulty AC and lets his thoughts run wild and messy.

He thinks about Theo more than he cares to admit. He wonders what part of town he's seeking shelter in, wonders how scared he is that he'll wake up surrounded by guns and hunters.

Isaac thinks about Theo and thinks about chimeras. He thinks of the desire to bend and break the supernatural rules, to create creatures without adhering to the history of these beings. And he wonders, idly and not very seriously, if that's part of what the anuk-ite is doing. Now, they know that it's part-human and part-werewolf. Now, Isaac wonders if that's significant, if the combination of parts is as important as the whole.

It's true of the Jeep, at least.

Because something goes wrong, something starts to sputter and the engine grinds its gears and Isaac just groans. He turns the hazard lights on and pulls over to the side of the road, interrupted in his pondering as he grabs a roll of duct tape and hops out of the car.

He pops the hood and a burst of smoke pours out and into his eyes, nose, lungs. He reacts, coughing hard and squeezing his eyes shut, hand fanning around his face to try and dispel the cloudy air.

And that's all it takes. Isaac is disoriented for half a second and that's all the jump the hunters need.

In the blink of an eye, in the passage of a single heartbeat, a hand grips around Isaac's forearm. It's an iron tight and searing hold that makes his eyes burn with the tears of a memory.

And then, Isaac is acting. He yanks his arm free while his other hand snakes into his pocket, dragging out a ring dagger and jabbing it forward. He doesn't hit the hunter's skin, instead connects with the fabric of a bulletproof vest, but he doesn't let that deter him.

Isaac grabs the hunter with the hand of his still fading red arm and

slams him face first into the metal rim of the Jeep. The hunter goes down hard and Isaac takes the temporary reprieve – the one, two, three seconds of stillness – to pull the other dagger from his pocket.

A second hunter lunges at him and Isaac sweeps through the air, aims away from the chest this time. He focuses on the arms, tearing twin cuts through the fabrics of his shirt and into the crook of his elbows. It's a debilitating sort of hit, the kind that hurts and bleeds and takes days to heal, but it's not the kind of hit that kills.

The hunter falls away and Isaac waits for the next attack, but it's Gerard that steps out of the shadows. He's got a jar in his hand and two other hunters flagging him, each carrying an assault rifle that Isaac has no doubt could kill him at such close range.

Isaac watches as Gerard's gaze tracks down to his hands, to the grip of the ring daggers. "I see you've learned something from our side," he muses, like it's funny. He unscrews the lid of the jar and Isaac knows what's inside before he even sees it, but he doesn't have the time to react. Because Gerard is smirking and reaching a hand into the contents and taunting, "Well, I've learned something from yours."

And then, he throws out a line of mountain ash. It circles Isaac in seconds. He can feel the static barrier grating along his skin, can taste the crackle of power, can hear the buzzing vibration of a vacuum-like suction.

The mountain ash falls in a ring around him and something like a spark of clarity prickles at the back of Isaac's mind, but, before he can fully grasp it, the butt of a gun is slamming into his forehead and he's falling to the ground and into darkness – *unconscious*.

Broken Glass

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 18

Word count: 6,030

Isaac wakes being dragged out of the back of a van. He immediately rears back and tries to break free from the grip around his biceps, but his hands are tied behind his back and he's disoriented from coming out of the darkness so quick and harsh and stumbling.

He drags his feet and kicks out against the hunters, but they easily pull him along, steering him through metal doors and into the armory. Here, a crowd is assembled, raucous and noisy and pounding at Isaac's sensitive ears.

Here, Isaac sees the kid from the police station (who he has since been informed is named Nolan), Sydney from the day of the SAT, and he even thinks he sees Christine among the throng. Isaac blinks his heavy eyes and hopes that it's a trick of the blur, hopes that his sight is deceiving him.

Isaac is yanked through the crowd and up towards the front of the room where Monroe stands with set shoulders and an air of confidence around her. When she sees him, her eyes take on a wicked glow and she announces, "*This* is Isaac Lahey. Abused by his father and then preyed on by the likes of Derek Hale. They saw his vulnerabilities and then they turned him into a *guard dog*, into Scott McCall's *pet*."

She spits the words like he's something vile and dangerous. And maybe he is because he bucks hard against the grip on his arms. He wants to grit his teeth and snarl at her, wants to let the animal loose, but then he figures that will only prove her point, so he schools his face into neutral, hoping that the heat behind his eyes will be enough to melt her down to ashes.

The hunters don't stop at the front of the crowd, they just keep dragging Isaac forward, past the selection of his peers and past a metal fence. There's a person chained to the structure – a faint smell of familiar werewolf – but it's drowned out by the char of electricity, of static water. Isaac cranes his neck to try to get a better look, to try to

see the person's face, but he's pulled away before he gets a chance.

Isaac is, instead, dragged deeper into the armory, down a long hallway and into another. He tries to memorize the directions, the left turn and then the right, but his mind feels soupy and warm, like it's dripping out of his ears and down his neck.

The hunters push him around a final corner, opening a metal door with a creak of the hinges. And then, Isaac is shoved through to a stone floor, unable to catch himself with the tie of his hands. He hits the ground with a quiet sound of *oof!* and an echo of faint pain reverberating through his bones and into his joints.

The door closes fast behind Isaac, faster than he can manage to get up, faster than he can stop it. Isaac hears the lock click into place and then he hears footsteps. Footsteps that come from *inside* the closet sized room.

And out of the shadows, holding a hand out to Isaac, appears Jackson Whittemore.

—

Jackson quickly realizes that Isaac's hands are tied and shreds the rope with the razor claws of a kanima turned werewolf. *Then* he helps Isaac up to his feet and, for a moment, they just stand there staring at each other.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Isaac asks when he regains the ability to speak, when his tongue can move again.

At the exact same time, Jackson says, "Did you see Ethan?"

They go back to staring at each other for another five seconds. Isaac blinks at Jackson like he isn't quite hearing him right, like his brain matter is blocking his eardrums and Jackson definitely didn't just ask him about one of the murder twins.

"Sorry," Isaac says, shaking his head to clear out the noise of his thoughts and the haze of his still healing head wound. "Did you say *Ethan*? What the hell is *he* doing here?"

"Did you see him?" Jackson repeats. There's an urgency to his voice that Isaac doesn't yet understand, something almost scared in the staccato over-enunciation of each one syllable word.

Isaac shrugs. “I don’t know, maybe. I saw someone chained up and their scent was familiar, but I didn’t get a good look.”

Jackson slumps like it’s the worst news he’s ever heard. His bottom lip catches between his teeth and his eyelids flutter a little wetly and his breathing turns a little ragged. And it’s such an obvious show of vulnerability that Isaac almost doesn’t believe what he’s seeing, almost rubs over his eyes to clear his vision. Because the Jackson Whittemore that Isaac used to know – used to *hate* – was full of sharp edges and perfect posture and cruelty without care.

This is someone else entirely.

“Why do you care?” Isaac asks. Because it’s so *obvious* that Jackson does, that he has some sort of personal stake in this, that he’s feeling something. But Isaac didn’t even realize Jackson *knew* Ethan, he didn’t even know that London is where Ethan had taken off to after Aiden and the oni.

“He’s with me,” Jackson says.

Ethan is *with* Jackson.

There’s something pointed to the words, some sort of insinuation and implication there. It ripples down Isaac’s arm and into his fingertips, settling in the palm of his hands as he cradles the sense of understanding.

Ethan.

The twin who attached himself to Danny as soon as the alpha pack arrived and who clearly very genuinely cared for him.

Ethan.

“Huh,” Isaac says quietly.

“What’s that supposed to mean, Lahey?” Jackson asks. He gets that familiar bite to his voice, that sort of automatic anger that used to pour off of him in waves, that used to be triggered by the tiniest of slights. “You got a problem?”

Isaac laughs a little. He’s not trying to be rude and he’s not necessarily trying to laugh *at* Jackson, but he just can’t help himself. It bubbles up in a little spark of amusement and then Jackson’s eyes are glowing blue and Isaac is holding his hand out between them, saying, “Easy.”

And, with a smile cracking his features, “I’m *with* Scott.”

Jackson looks at him blankly for a fraction of a second, then his eyes turn from glowing blue to a dull oceanic color. There’s recognition there, a slight widening at the underlying meaning in those words. Then, he takes a page from Isaac’s book and repeats, “Huh.”

“Exactly,” Isaac says. And, because he’s a little shit and because Jackson deserves it, he adds, “So. Uh. The rave?”

“Shut it, Lahey,” Jackson says, quickly and without a breath of hesitation.

Isaac sort of wishes Jackson would stop calling him that, especially in such a cramped space, but, surprisingly, he doesn’t feel that usual telltale tug of fear. He’s standing in a dark and cold and *small* room with *Jackson Whittemore*. And... he doesn’t feel claustrophobic.

Something in that feels like victory.

So, Isaac just laughs again, all smug and irritating, shining bright as Jackson glares daggers at him.

—

Isaac presses against the sliding door. He tries to slip his fingers between the door jamb and the metal, tries to wrench free, tries to pull back and crank it open. He tries, but he can’t get leverage, can’t quite find the strength to persevere.

“Don’t bother,” Jackson says, quiet and all knowing in that superior way of his. It sends Isaac back to high school, makes him feel small in his skin, like his body is too big for him. “There’s no way out and they’re pumping wolfsbane into the air. Can’t you smell it?”

Isaac breathes in deep through his nose, paying closer attention to the minute fragrances of the air. For a moment, he just smells metal and Jackson, but then he gets hit with the floral wrongness of wolfsbane. It’s cloyingly sweet but sour all at once, it tickles at his nose and makes Isaac want to sneeze.

They’re poisoning the air. The hunters are oh-so-slowly weakening them – *killing* them.

And that sends Isaac back to the rave too, back to Victoria Argent and her attempt to murder Scott that ended in the taking of her own life.

Isaac sighs and slumps down against the door, sitting with his knees drawn up to his chest and his head tipping back and back. He speaks into the silence, asking, “How long have you been here?”

“Two days, maybe,” Jackson answers with a small shrug, like he isn’t quite sure, like his memory isn’t quite intact. “We flew in to help, but, obviously, we didn’t get very far.”

Isaac’s a little surprised that Jackson and Ethan showed up without being prompted or asked, a little surprised that they showed up with the desire to fight a war. He knows them both too well for that – too pessimistically – to think it was an act of pure kindness, that they came all this way for something that wasn’t directly affecting them. “The war’s left Beacon Hills now, hasn’t it?”

Jackson nods and Isaac can barely see it in the darkness, but he hears it better when he answers, “Yep. They attacked Ethan and I on our anniversary.”

Isaac winces, but doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t really know what to say to that. He kind of wants to ask all sorts of personal questions, but he doesn’t think that Jackson would take kindly to that. He always was the keep to yourself, turn the other cheek, you don’t see me and I don’t see you kind of person.

“Hey,” Isaac says because he doesn’t like the way the quiet feels suffocating. “Have you ever seen *The Amazing Spider-Man*?”

“Don’t you dare, Lahey,” Jackson says like a warning, like he knows exactly what Isaac’s getting at.

That makes Isaac laugh and smirk a little. There’s something pleasing about riling Jackson up, about being the one to have the advantage for once. It satisfies the sixteen year old Isaac with his inferiority complex and borrowed leather jacket, the version of him costumed up in an emulation of his current authority figure.

He says, “You know my name’s Isaac, right? I think you can call me that.”

“Not gonna happen, Lahey.”

Isaac sighs, but lets it drop.

Isaac's trying his best not to be worried. He knows it won't take long for Scott and the others to realize he's missing. He knows they'll come looking for him and he knows they'll find him.

For now, he's just trying his best to sit pretty. He's trying his best to wait and be patient.

He remembers what Scott said to him the last time they were trapped in this armory, remembers choosing not to give up and give in, remembers not letting the hopelessness in. So, for now, he doesn't physically fight – too futile and weak to try – but he remains mentally strong.

"While we're here," Jackson says, as the seconds have stretched into minutes and the silence has grown heavy over them. "I feel like maybe I should say something? You know, like, sorry?"

"You didn't kill my dad," Isaac says without pause. Because he knew as soon as he saw Jackson that this subject would be broached. He can only guess what kind of growing up Jackson has done since they last saw each other, what kind of self reflections he's gone through since the days of the kanima. And, while Isaac still doesn't like him, he does owe him this statement. Because if Isaac says it to Stiles, then he has to say it to Jackson too. "You weren't in control. Matt killed my father. Not you."

"That's not really what I meant," Jackson says, like Isaac's only seeing part of the conversation, like there's a gaping blindspot. "I'm... I'm more sorry for not speaking up until I knew it would hurt you to do so."

Isaac sighs. He picks idly at his cuticles. And he knows he's still focusing on the wrong part of the apology, but it's easier this way, easier just to say, "They would've found the freezer once they searched the house anyway. I was always going to be a suspect, you just sped the process along."

Isaac doesn't know why he isn't angry. He probably should be. He should probably hate Jackson for all the power he held and how little he used it to help anyone other than himself. He should probably hate Jackson for turning a blind eye, for leaving Isaac suffering under his dad's hand for years, but, for some reason, he just doesn't.

"I didn't want anyone to report it," Isaac says quietly, like it's some sort of secret. And, he reasons, it sort of is. He's never said the words out loud before, never had the courage to admit something so fucked

up. "I didn't want my dad to be arrested. I didn't want to be taken from him." He exhales a shaking, shuddering breath. "And I *know* how that sounds, but he was the only family I had left. I knew he was a monster, but I didn't care because at least I wasn't alone."

Jackson makes a noise in his throat, almost like understanding. And maybe he does get it more than Isaac first assumed. Because Jackson is an orphan too. He has wonderfully distant adoptive parents who throw money at him, but not care. He has all the resources in the world, but, still, it wasn't enough to save him from himself. Still, he was so lonely that he turned into the kanima.

"Do you wish he was still alive?" Jackson asks. It's so forward that Isaac almost chokes on it, but, of course, Jackson Whittemore doesn't pull punches.

"No," Isaac whispers. "At first, I did. But, now, I don't know." He scrubs a hand through his hair. "He deserved what happened to him and now he's gone for good. He can't get inside my head anymore. He can't... He can't make me love him still."

Isaac doesn't know why he's saying all of this to *Jackson* of all people, but the words just keep coming. He doesn't know why it's so easy to let them leave his lips, but it feels good, in a way. It feels like alleviating a crushing weight, a burden he didn't even realize was still resting on his shoulders, a pressure he didn't even realize was contorting his spine. It feels like he can sit up a little straighter, breathe a little clearer.

"I used to be so jealous of you," Jackson says, voice so quiet that Isaac almost doesn't believe that he's spoken at all. And that's something Isaac never expected to hear from *him*, from the haughty kid with the sharp jaw and the sharper tongue. "I remember how you and Camden would run around the neighborhood and how your dad would watch you from the porch. And... I don't know. I wanted that, I guess. And so, when it was taken from you, I thought... *good*. I thought, if I can't have that, then no one else should either."

It's not okay. It's not right and it's not justifiable, but Isaac still isn't angry. He still should be – he should *hate* Jackson – but he can't find the passion in him for it. He doesn't have the energy to be mad at Jackson for something he *didn't* do when they were kids. If anything, he just feels resigned to the past, just feels so content in his present that he doesn't care what it took him to get here.

And that's almost more meaningful than any apology Isaac could ever receive: the knowledge that, despite being locked in a room with Jackson Whittemore, he still wouldn't change a thing if it meant experiencing pack and love and *family*.

So, Isaac doesn't say another word and Jackson doesn't either. They sit in the silence of the room and the fragility of tentative company.

—

The wolfsbane burns at Isaac's lungs and makes it hard to breathe. It feels like he's drying out, like the oxygen is being stolen from the room once more. It feels like a weakness in his bones and in his veins, feels like he's fading into the floor.

Isaac's still trying not to be worried, but it's difficult when he doesn't know for sure if Scott is safe. For all he knows, the anuk-ite could've merged by now. For all he knows, the hunters could've ambushed already.

For all he knows, Scott could be dead.

Isaac tries to remain calm, but the wolfsbane is really sinking in now and his heart is hammering loud and fast in his chest. Isaac tries to remain calm, but it's a losing battle. His composure is slipping and his lungs are burning and his eyes are flashing with rings of glowing amber.

Isaac, feeling desperate for some form of context, some sort of hint into what's going on outside of the walls of the armory, presses his ear to the door and listens. It's difficult to concentrate through the weakening of his senses, the pulse of his own heartbeat, and the metal of the door. But, eventually, he locks onto a conversation and memorizes every word.

"This is all the yellow wolfsbane we could find."

That's Gerard's voice. Isaac recognizes the gravel of it, the grating timber of old. It sends a shiver down Isaac's spine, a chill at the thought of the most powerful type of wolfsbane – the kind with no cure, the kind that can't even be burned out.

"Extremely rare, but enough to make one bullet."

Isaac doesn't have to hear the rest of the conversation to know who it's for. He knows Scott is the final target, the king piece that they want to

knock off the board. He knows that the bullet is for Scott and he knows that it could kill him in seconds.

That's all the motivation Isaac needs to press up against the fragility of his joints and find a wobbling balance on his feet.

"What're you doing?" Jackson asks. He sounds tired and sort of despondent, almost defeated.

"Getting out of here," Isaac says without consideration for the impossibilities of that statement. Because he doesn't have a choice anymore. If he doesn't break free, then Scott is going to die.

Isaac can't let that happen. He *refuses* to let that happen. He's lost Scott once before and he's not going to go through it again. He *won't*.

"Not when you're being poisoned by wolfsbane, you're not," Jackson says. And Isaac sort of wants to punch him for all of his assholery and pessimism. But then, Jackson is standing too, almost shouldering Isaac out of the way to get to the door. He says, "But it's the purple kind. And the purple kind doesn't work on me."

Isaac quirks an eyebrow in confusion, doesn't understand what Jackson is saying.

Then, when the heavy footsteps outside go quiet, when it sounds like most of the armory has cleared out for some sort of mission, Jackson slips his fingers over the lip of the door.

And, making it look easier than slicing through butter, Jackson rips open the door with a bending of the metal and loud cracking of the lock.

Isaac stares at Jackson, very aware that his jaw is on the floor and if his eyebrows lifted any higher they'd go into orbit. He stammers, "Wh-?"

"Go," Jackson says, like he didn't just do the impossible.

"You were able to do that the whole time?" Isaac asks, more than a little incredulous, more than a little too close to yelling. He narrows his eyes at the other beta, at the former kanima, who's apparently still *somewhat* kanima. He shakes his head, trying to understand. "I don't – Why have you just been sitting in here for two days?"

Jackson rolls his eyes like Isaac is the dumbest person on the planet.

He doesn't answer the question, not really. Instead, he just says, "I'm not leaving without Ethan and I can't go find him without drawing attention, so just – just go. Consider this repayment for all the hell I put you through."

Isaac shakes his head again, starts to say, "No–"

But Jackson cuts him off, "Save Scott and then he'll save the rest of us." And, when Isaac makes no moves to step through the open doorway, when he stays frozen in place, he barks out, a little frustrated, "Isaac, go."

Isaac hears the use of his first name and he knows that Jackson is serious, knows that he has no intention of coming with him, and, by waiting around, Isaac is only wasting time and putting them both in danger. So, he steps past Jackson and into the hallway, stopping only long enough to glance over his shoulder and say, "We'll come back. I promise."

And then, Jackson is slamming the door back to closed and Isaac is trying to remember the sequence of turns from his clouded memory.

—

Isaac sneaks with caution through the drab gray walls of the armory. Fortunately, despite the dizziness of his head and the confusion of the hunters dragging him through, Isaac had all but memorized the building's blueprint for their previous plan of demolishing their weapons. It's still clear enough in his mind that Isaac's able to orient himself and trace his way back into the weapon center of the armory.

He pauses, hiding around a corner and watching from the shadows as a final hunter steps out of the room. Isaac waits only until his back is turned and then books it down the hall and to the quickly shutting door. He manages to jam his foot between the door and the wall just before it can click closed.

Up close and personal with the door, Isaac notices that it's still a little bent out of shape. He soaks in the satisfaction of that hindrance – the way that Lydia overpowered and inconvenienced the hunters – but he lingers only for a moment. Quickly, he slinks past the distorted metal and through to the armory inside.

It's not completely bare as it was last time, but there still aren't very many weapons on the shelves. This time, Isaac is grateful for the vacancy. It gives him less to look through and a more efficient search.

Isaac promptly gets to work in scouring the shelves for the yellow wolfsbane bullet. He knows there's a chance it could have been hidden elsewhere or loaded into a gun already, but he doesn't let himself indulge in that fear.

Instead, Isaac stays focused and steady – *anchored*. He pushes aside automatic weapons and digs through towers of ammo. Before he finds the bullet, he finds his confiscated ring daggers.

Isaac's heart leaps into his throat at the sight of them just sitting on the shelf like that, for anyone to take or destroy or get rid of. Isaac is quick in snatching them back into his grip, in spinning them around his fingers only once, then shoving them deep into his pockets.

He can't believe he hadn't noticed they'd been taken. He can't believe he almost left without them.

Isaac can't believe his negligence, but he doesn't have the time to berate himself. He has to keep looking. And so, he presses up onto his toes to get a look at the top of the shelves, at the same metal that he and Scott had once laid upon, bodies pressed together at every inch.

He comes up empty handed so he tilts his neck down to look along the middle section. And here, seemingly innocuous and tucked among assault rifles, is a single black case. Isaac pops the latch and opens the lid.

There, nestled inside, is a yellow wolfsbane bullet.

Isaac pockets it without hesitation. He snags the bullet and shoves it in his pocket alongside one of the daggers and slams the case closed, taking care to put it in the same exact spot – he's hopeful that it might slow down their realization that the bullet was taken, might give him a bigger window of freedom from the inevitable fury that will be pointed his way.

It strikes Isaac as a little cocky – that the wolfsbane was just sitting out, that they didn't care to check if the purple wolfsbane would work on a former kanima, that they have mountain ash but they didn't use it to keep them locked up.

It strikes Isaac as a little cocky and a little careless, but he can't find it in himself to be concerned. Because he doesn't think it's a trap, doesn't think it's intentional. He thinks it's just a failed judgment, just Gerard's inflated ego and his underestimation of everyone around him.

Isaac almost feels bolstered by it, almost hopes it will be their fatal flaw.

Isaac runs into a hunter on his way out. He's standing guard outside the main exit of the armory, and Isaac knows there's no way out without crossing his path (or the path of a hunter just like him).

And so, he uses the element of surprise to his advantage and attacks the hunter from behind. He keeps the daggers in his pocket and uses his claws instead. Because if this guy wants to fight the supernatural, then Isaac is going to give him exactly what he wants, he's going to give him the full experience.

The hunter tries to turn his gun on Isaac, but he doesn't have the speed for it. Isaac is quickly extending a hand and putting the brakes on the movement, catching the barrel of the gun in his hand, pressing back, and *twisting* the man's arm until he cries out.

The gun crashes out of his grip and to the ground.

As soon as the weapon is out of his hands, the hunter goes completely still. It's like he doesn't know what to do now, like he's completely unprepared for this moment. And, Isaac guesses, he probably is.

Gerard put that gun in his hand, but he's been hiding behind it. And, now that it's gone, he doesn't know how to proceed, doesn't know how to fight, doesn't know how to protect himself.

Isaac feels a little sorry for him, feels a little bad about it because, in the long run, this is just a man warped by fear. But, unfortunately for him, Isaac can't afford to let him call for backup. And so, he slams the hunter back until his head hits hard against the stone wall of the armory. He collapses in an instant, passing out and falling out of Isaac's hold.

Isaac hesitates just long enough to check that the man's head isn't bleeding – it's not, thank god – and then he takes off running.

He's still aching from the effects of the wolfsbane poisoning. His lungs still burn with every breath, his legs still shake with every step. But he doesn't have a choice, he doesn't have the safety for hesitation. Isaac has to get some space between himself and the building before they notice that he's missing.

And so, despite the pain, he just keeps running.

Isaac runs until he physically can't anymore, until he sees stars and the ground spins beneath his feet. He runs until his legs give out and he comes to a screeching stop along the side of the road, hopefully mostly out of sight in the cover of darkness and the trees lining the street.

Here, Isaac hunches over and lets his hand meet his knees, lets himself gulp in fresh and unpoisoned air. (It's not his first time being poisoned, but that doesn't make it any easier, doesn't make it any less effective, any less agonizing.)

Isaac looks up at the real stars of the night sky, the inky black dotted with freckles of white. He stares up at the moon and tries to drink his fill of its power. It's not full, but it's still shining bright.

He thinks that maybe he tricks himself into believing it helps – like a placebo of sorts – but, regardless, Isaac does find some relief. He does feel his lungs stop quivering, does taste the wolfsbane on his tongue going dull, going less saturated and consuming.

Now, Isaac tries to reorient himself. He knows roughly where he is because he's still not far from the armory, but he has no idea where any of his pack would be. Annoyingly, the hunters took his phone and it wasn't enough of a priority for Isaac to look for it back at the armory, so, now, with no known next step, no definitive plan for the next move, he doesn't have any idea where to go.

All Isaac can really do is start walking in the general direction of central Beacon Hills.

Isaac might have broken free and he might have stolen the yellow wolfsbane, but he's still not feeling very hopeful at the moment.

—

Isaac keeps walking until a car pulls up next to him, laying on the horn. He startles to a skidding sort of stop as headlights shine on the pavement. He's thinking of Brett and Lori and he's *terrified*.

That is, until he sees blue paint and hears a familiar grinding engine.

It's Stiles' Jeep.

The window rolls down and Stiles calls out to him, "Abandon my Jeep

again and I won't come to your rescue!"

Isaac laughs in pure relief, in pure joy at seeing his best friend. He flips him off, just for the appearance of it, but then he's climbing into the passenger side and settling into the seat with a tired sort of sigh. His bones feel like they're made of rubber, his lungs made of paper, his eyelids heavier than they've maybe ever been. His entire body feels exhausted and almost empty.

It's like stepping inside the Jeep gives Isaac permission to crash and burn, to let the adrenaline seep out of his body and the weakness take over.

"Dude, are you okay?" Stiles asks as he starts to drive.

Isaac doesn't answer because they both already know he isn't. Instead, he remembers the bullet in his pocket and says, "Where's Scott?"

Stiles laughs right in his face. "Jesus. The two of you," he groans with a shake of his head. "You know I basically had to *forbid* him from going after you. I *told* him you could take care of yourself, and see! You escaped all on your own."

Stiles has this shit eating grin on his face and Isaac has the burning desire to wipe it off. And so, he says, "I had help, actually."

"Help?" Stiles parrots. The grin falls away into confusion. "From who?"

"Jackson," Isaac says simply, just to watch the way Stiles' eyes bug out and the way he stutters with startling noise. It's like his mind is going a mile a minute trying to compute this new information, trying to understand it. Then, Isaac puts him out of his misery just a little, sobers up slightly and says, "We have to go back for him. I promised we would."

Stiles' mouth ceases in its open and close, open and close motion. He runs a hand through his hair, sighs quietly, "Okay, we will, but it's gonna have to wait. We can't go right now."

"Why not?" Isaac asks. The subtle amusement in his veins turns to ice cold dread.

"Because Scott and Malia are with Deucalion trying to learn how to fight the merged anuk-ite blind since *that* happened and, apparently, we're not allowed to look at it. According to Halwyn. And also you? Is

it true you figured that out?"

"Yes," Isaac says quickly. And then, "To the point now, Stiles?"

"Right so," Stiles says. "Lydia had a premonition and now we need to go to this shipping container place to warn them before they get killed."

Isaac swallows down his fear as it rises like bile in his throat.

—

Isaac and Stiles pull up on the edge of the abandoned parking garage with a squeaking of the brake pads and an illumination of headlights. Stiles cuts the engine and pulls the keys from the ignition, but Isaac is out of the car before it's even stopped running.

He's sprinting under the structure and into Scott's arms before he can even really think about it, before he can even make the conscious decision to move.

Scott is ready for him, though, quickly pulling Isaac in close and burying his head into Isaac's neck, into his ear, into his hair, into every spot he can reach. Isaac feels it as Scott's breath trembles out of his lungs, he can feel the vibration as their chests meet and they hug so fiercely.

"Oh my god," Scott whispers into his skin. "Oh my god."

"I'm here," Isaac says just as quietly, just as intimate. He can practically taste Scott's worry in the air, can practically taste the shift from fear to relief to joy. He can practically taste the love like honey on his tongue.

"I was so scared, but Stiles said, and you—" Scott rambles nonsensically, words spilling out of his mouth uninhibited. "I love you. I love you. I love you."

"I love you too," Isaac whispers, laughing just a little, just a reactionary chuckle of being so pleased and so warm. It releases like the ringing of a bell, like a chiming sound of, "I'm okay. You're okay."

"Yeah, hate to break this up, but we're definitely not going to be okay for long," Stiles says with a tone that suggests he actually doesn't mind separating them. He adds, a little harsh and sardonic in his own

fear, “The hunters are coming here, remember? We gotta go.”

Scott breaks the hug, but doesn’t break contact with Isaac. They remain wrapped up in each other’s space. It’s mostly Scott’s doing, like he can’t bear to let Isaac out of his sight again. And Isaac? Well, he just lets it happen. He just lets Scott take comfort in their affection, in the press of their shoulders and arms together. He just lets Scott feel that he’s here and he’s real and he’s *alive*.

Because Isaac can only imagine what this has been like for him, knowing that Isaac was taken, but not knowing if he was okay. Isaac can only imagine how he would feel if the positions were reversed, how desperate he would be to never let Scott go. And so, he lets Scott take what he needs and tries to give it all freely.

(It’s not entirely selfless, of course. There’s a part of Isaac that needs this too, needs this so deep in his bones that he almost *aches* with it, with *Scott* and affection and closeness.)

“Scott!” a familiar voice shouts from the edge of the garage. It grows closer with the clicking of heels and a second, even more desperate cry of, “Scott!”

It’s Lydia and Peter, an unlikely duo, sprinting through the cover of darkness and approaching at fast speed.

“What’re you guys doing here?” Scott asks, his expression warping with doubt and distress. Isaac thinks he’s starting to get it now, thinks he’s starting to realize that something bad is about to happen, that their near-joint arrivals aren’t entirely coincidence.

“They’re coming,” Peter pants. “Monroe and more and they have heavy firepower.”

And then, before anyone else can even take a breath, the words are punctuated by the sound of gunfire. It’s machine gun firing, the rapid spewing of bullets. There’s no time to act, there’s no time to think, there’s no time to stop it.

They turn to face the noise and everything drifts into slow motion. Deucalion falls to his knees and tips forward into a pool of his own blood across the pavement.

Rain starts to fall, a downpour out of nowhere, a storm they weren’t ready for, and then that’s it. Monroe steps into the shelter of the parking garage with an army behind her and. *And*.

The shooting begins.

The Wolves of War

Chapter Summary

Contains dialogue from season 6 episode 20

Word count: 9,799

Chapter Notes

Only the epilogue left now :(

The bullets rain down on the parking garage as the hunters descend on the structure. They're surrounded on all sides, all they can really do is hide and hope for the best, hide and hope for some chance at survival.

Isaac ends up tucked behind a pillar with Stiles at his side. Stiles, who's pulling a gun out of the waistband of his jeans and expertly loading it with ammo. For a moment, Isaac stares at him like he's a stranger, like this is a version of Stiles that he's never seen before. And, truthfully, he kind of is.

Stiles looks back at him, cinnamon eyes locking with blue in the darkness. Something silent passes between them, some sort of quiet acknowledgment that this might be the end. This could be it for them, but they're not going down without a fight.

Bullets ricochet off the cement edge of their hiding spot, coming too close for comfort and filling the space with the loud sound of gunfire. It's all chaos and noise and shoulders curling in to contort against the makeshift shield of stone hideouts.

Distantly, Isaac hears Scott calling his name, hears the roar of, *"Isaac!"*

It's the kind of shout that could bring Isaac back from the edge of a cliff, from the brink of death, from the claws of the wolf within. But he doesn't let himself shout back. Even though it hurts to let the call go unanswered, he can't allow himself to give away his and Stiles' position.

Though, in the end, it doesn't matter much. A hunter, from the outside edge of the abandoned parking garage, advances far enough to get a glimpse of the two of them. Isaac sees the barrel of the gun, sees the

finger on the trigger, and instantly shoves Stiles behind him. He pushes him back against the stone of the pillar, hard enough that the impact probably hurts him – it's not lethal, not like a clip emptied in his chest would be. He uses his own body to protect that of his best friend, to cover the vulnerabilities of being human.

Isaac stares down the hunter and all but *dares* him to shoot. He doesn't close his eyes and he doesn't flinch. He just casts his last action as one of protection and love. He prepares himself for the end.

He readies himself for blood and darkness and the goodbyes he never wanted to say.

But then, an engine roars and tires squeal and blinding headlights shine through the parking lot. A prison transport van charges through the parking lot and *slams* into the hunter, sending him flying back through the air, a good three feet before he comes down with his gun tumbling out of his grip.

There's a moment where everything goes still. Where the window rolls down and Braeden comes into view, smirking at Isaac through the words of, "You didn't think you were doing this without me, did you?"

And then, Derek is stepping up next to her, finding Isaac easily with his eyes. A searing connection flows between them, forged in fire as he says, "Without us?"

Isaac smiles and Derek smiles back. Then, he's baring his fangs and glowing blue eyes and *lunging* at the hunter like he has a personal vendetta against him. And, considering the fact that he almost killed Isaac, he probably does.

The gunfire unpauses, but, this time, Isaac fights back. They all do.

With reinforcements on their side and aiding in the battle, Isaac tumbles out of his hiding spot and into an attack. He uses each hunter's weapon against them, grabbing guns and ripping them out of grips. He uses them like a makeshift baseball bat, taking a lesson from Stiles and bashing the metal into jaws and chests and stomachs.

A hunter comes at Isaac from behind, tries to get the jump on him, but he's quick to turn around. He hears footsteps and then he's wrapping fingers around the barrel of a gun, pressing hard enough that the hunter can't get an aim, can't make the shot. Isaac uses his one handed hold to tug the hunter closer, getting him near enough to use

his still free hand to slice his claws across the man's face. His beard scratches under Isaac's hand as blood pours over his cheek and down his neck, the hunter crying out in *pain*.

Isaac kicks him in the stomach and sends him stumbling backwards with his gun falling useless to the floor.

At some point, Isaac ends up back to back with Derek, shouting over the noise instinctively, though Derek would hear him even if he whispered it, whispered, "You actually came back on your own this time! Good job!"

He hears Derek's hollow laughter, the way he tries to shrug the joke off with, "Focus *please*. I've already saved your ass once tonight."

And that makes Isaac laugh a little too, but then he spots movement in his peripheral vision. One of the hunters is trying to make a bold and daring move, trying to sneak up on them and find advantage that way.

Isaac isn't having it.

He disconnects from Derek and turns on his heel, grabbing the man by the arm and snapping the bone in half without care or consideration. He revels in the groan of agony, the way the hunter almost immediately scrambles to run away.

Isaac looks over his shoulder at Derek. Derek, who's staring back at him with jaw slightly dropped and eyes a little wide. Isaac smirks at him and says, "There. *Now* we're even."

"But the arm though, really?" Derek asks.

Isaac's smile starts to widen, but it falters quickly as things around them go eerily quiet. It makes the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, makes his stomach churn with the anxiety of, *what's next?*

Isaac pulls his eyes away from Derek's once more, looking around at the abandoned parking lot. All around them, the hunters are retreating. All around them, cars are squeaking off into the distance as they turn tail and run.

Despite it all, Isaac doesn't feel very optimistic. He doesn't feel that familiar tug of relief. Instead, he just feels tired. He feels breathless and burning from the poison still stuck in his lungs. He feels weak in the knees and thoroughly exhausted, but he also knows that this is

nowhere close to over.

Still, Isaac lets himself smile as Derek approaches, as he pulls Isaac into a hug so tight it almost hurts.

“I was worried about you,” Derek whispers.

Isaac opens his mouth, either to repeat the sentiment or to assure Derek that he’s okay. But, before any words can leave his mouth, Stiles is speaking over him, snarking from close by, “Well, Isaac only went and got himself captured while you were gone.”

Derek pulls back from the hug to glare at Stiles, but that expression quickly turns on Isaac. It’s piercing and sharp, but it’s protective and scared underneath.

Isaac mumbles a half-aborted, “I’m okay.” And, he looks over at Stiles, fixes him with a sharp look of his own, with narrowed eyes and a mouthed, “*tattle tale*.”

Derek makes a face like he’s going to protest further, but, this time, he’s the one that’s interrupted. A natural wave of silence ebbs over the group, flowing around them and muting Derek’s tongue as the attention falls to Deucalion.

There’s blood on his lips and Scott is kneeling at his side, holding his hand like he’s trying to drag away his pain. But, Isaac notes with a spark of worry and a haunted memory, there’s no black veins running up his arm.

“Gerard...” Deucalion whispers. “What he f-fears most...” his breath stutters and stammers and shakes, “he can’t beat you. And he,” Deucalion looks up at Scott, almost smiling despite it all, “knows it.”

And then, Deucalion’s hand drops away from Scott’s and his head tips to one side as his eyes go blank and unseeing.

He’s dead.

Isaac feels this throbbing of *sorry*. Despite not liking him, despite not regretting their last encounter and the harshness of his words, he still feels *guilt*. Because all Deucalion wanted was to find peace. And they dragged him into this war and *killed* him.

“It’s really started, hasn’t it?” Malia asks.

Isaac's only half listening as he moves closer to Scott, as he puts a hand on his shoulder. He doesn't kneel down beside him, but not for lack of trying. He keeps thinking about doing it, but he can't quite bring his body to cooperate. It's like he doesn't want to get any closer to Deucalion, like somehow that would make this all the more real.

Instead, Isaac offers steadying hands as Scott presses up to his own feet, as he stands and turns his back on the dead body and pants, breathless with, "It's an all out war."

And then, it's like he really notices Derek for the first time. Something runs taut between them and Scott is walking forward like he's being pulled on a wire. Isaac watches as the space between them closes and a hug forms and Scott says, almost awed in an odd way, "You came back."

Quietly, faintly, he hears Derek's answering, "You didn't think I was running, did you?"

Isaac smiles at the sight, at the sight of his brother and his boyfriend caring for each other so deeply. Even if they won't always admit it, they've come so far from who they were when they first met. They've grown up and into fierce allies and tight friends. They're pack now, and they have been for a while.

Isaac averts his gaze to give them some privacy, instead turning to Braeden and smiling as he says, "You came to help?"

Braeden shakes her head and gives a resounding, "I came to win."

They hug too. It stretches on for only a few seconds and it's a little awkward, but it's nice regardless. It's nice to be together, to have so many of the people Isaac cares about standing together, even if the circumstances are less than ideal.

And then, like a reality check, the radio of the Jeep begins to crackle with static and...

"Blood and destruction. Dreadful objects so familiar. All pity choked with custom of fell deeds."

They're all moving before they can even really think about it, rushing towards the Jeep as Stiles and Scott climb inside to get a closer listen. Isaac stays standing out in the cold night air, only leaning against the open window of Stiles' side.

“Caesar’s spirit, raging for revenge. With Ate by his side come hot from hell. Shall in these confines with a monarch’s voice.”

The radio turns to static as something like recognition flares in Isaac’s stomach. He can taste the words on his tongue, can hear them echoing in his thoughts.

“Do you know the rest, Scott?” Gerard’s voice calls like a taunt. *“Do you know your Shakespeare?”*

Isaac can tell by the look on Scott’s face that he doesn’t, so he reaches an outstretched hand into the Jeep, gesturing for Scott to hand over the radio. He does so with nothing more than a crinkle of his eyebrows, something like an impressed sort of shock.

Isaac presses the button and begins to speak, hopes that Gerard recognizes his voice, hopes it wipes that smug grin of his right off his face. *“Cry ‘havoc!’ and let slip the dogs of war.”*

“War, indeed,” Gerard says, but, unfortunately, he doesn’t sound surprised. He just continues his drawl with, *“You might have escaped, Isaac Lahey, but I still have some visitors here from London.”*

Isaac already knows what that means. Stiles does too and he’s sure Lydia’s figured it out as well, but, even still, Gerard doesn’t stop. It’s like he’s obsessed with the sound of his own voice.

“Even someone like Jackson Whittemore couldn’t resist coming back to Beacon Hills.” Then, *“Say hello, Jackson.”*

The radio immediately floods with the sound of electricity crackling and Jackson crying out in pain. Isaac wants to plug his ears and drown out the sound, wants to bury it so deep that it can no longer reach him. Because this is his fault now. Because he could’ve helped Jackson escape, because he could’ve fought him harder on his stubborn desire to stay behind.

But then, Jackson’s voice is cutting through, a panting and knife sharp edge of, *“Do it again, old man. Come a little closer. I’m gonna shove that thing so far up your ass!”*

“Lost none of his charm, has he?” Gerard snarks. He sounds like he’s smiling, like he’s grinning at the torture he’s inflicting. *“You can find him here with us at the armory, Scott. In fact,”* he says, as if he’s just deciding this now, as if he hasn’t rehearsed this little speech, *“I’m going to tell you where to find all of them.”*

Isaac looks across the car at Scott, looks at him with shining blue eyes and something like reassurance written in his irises. He hopes Scott can read it, hopes he knows that they're going to figure this out, that they're going to win.

"Your deputy hellhound met some friends of his while responding to a call at Eichen House."

Isaac grits his teeth against the threat there. He douses his fiery anger in the cool water of certainty, the determination in knowing that the hunters can't win this war with Gerard at their lead.

Nothing good ever happens at Eichen House, but that's what makes it so predictable, so obvious, so easily fixed. Or, at least, that's what Isaac's telling himself.

"Your father was on his way back from San Francisco with the goal of entering the fight. But he didn't get far."

And Isaac's never been a fan of Rafael McCall, but he knows what it is to lose a father. He knows what it is to lose a dad who hasn't always been good to you. He knows it doesn't make it any easier, and he doesn't want Scott to have to suffer that same story.

"You might want to tell your mother to skip her shift at the hospital tonight."

That almost makes Isaac lose all sense of control. He can feel the pressure building at the tips of his fingers, the thrumming of his claws wanting to pop out and shred. He only manages to keep them buried with the knowledge that Gerard isn't actually here to be torn apart.

"Liam and his friends are there now. Optimistic of them, but woefully ill-advised."

And, of course, part of this fight will end there. Because nothing good ever happens at the hospital either. Because Liam knows that building like the back of his hand and he'll have the greatest advantage there. Even if it is unwise or foolhardy, they don't have any other option than to try.

"This is how you wage war, Scott," Gerard says, like he's teaching them some kind of lesson. *"The strategic positioning of your army against theirs. Which is why you will come to me. You will try to save as many as you can."* His voice turns to such a soft whisper that they all have to lean in to hear him, *"And you might even save a few. But... your limited*

resources will be spread thin, and, ultimately, you will fail."

Isaac wants to scoff. He wants to roll his eyes and punch Gerard across the face. Instead, he simply watches as Scott closes his eyes and grips hard against the handheld radio, so tight that the plastic creaks and warps beneath his fingers.

"The dogs of war, Scott. They're coming for you."

The radio cuts and Gerard's voice disappears, leaving only silence and fear in its wake.

—

The group gathers in the back room of Beacon Hills Animal Clinic, regrouping in a place of moderate safety and preparing for the fight ahead.

"Where've you been?" Isaac asks Braeden. Because she wasn't answering their calls and they haven't seen her since the Beast was their biggest worry.

"In Brazil," Braeden says. "Tracking down Kate Argent."

That sends a shiver of fear down Isaac's spine. It trickles like water over each vertebrae, a raining of fright and an instinctive sort of standing on edge. Isaac's shoulders square back and his eyes flick to Derek as the words register, as he realizes what this could mean.

"What?" Stiles asks, like he's confused. "Were you working for the Calaveras again?"

"No," Braeden answers simply. "Chris hired me."

And that's even more shocking than the initial mention of Kate, even more of a plot twist of the knife. But, of course, Argent would realize that the war would bring his sister back into the fold, that Gerard leading the charge meant that now was the time to take her out.

Isaac wonders what it must mean for Argent to hand that power over to someone else, to ask someone else to be the one holding the gun. He wonders if it has to do with the return of Ghost Rider Allison, if putting a bullet in his daughter – as fake as she might've been – was enough to make him realize it didn't *have* to be him. He didn't always have to carry the burden, he wasn't the only one with shoulders to bear it.

“And did you kill her?” Isaac asks. Because no one else will, but because he needs to know. *They* need to know. If Kate is still out there, if she’s headed their way, then they need to be ready for her.

“Well, let’s just say she won’t be coming back to Beacon Hills,” Braeden says. And Isaac knows what that means, knows that means, *yes*.

Once more, his eyes fall on Derek. He roams over the slight gray of his beard and the tiredness of his green eyes. He searches for some sign of emotion in Derek, some sort of feeling to give way to his reaction to all of this. But, really, Derek seems unfazed. His arms are crossed over his chest and he shows no wavering in composure, no guilt or grief or pain.

Instead, Derek just says, “Fill us in on what we missed.”

“It’s not just the hunters,” Lydia says, speaking mostly to Braeden since this is information Derek would already know. She doesn’t stop to ask if Braeden was informed on the way, just assumes that she wasn’t, and adds, “It’s called the anuk-ite.”

“It uses fear to cause disharmony and destroy entire communities,” Scott explains. And, “It can get in your head, make you see things.”

“What does it look like?” Braeden asks. Her arms fold over her own chest, like a mirror of Derek standing beside her. (The quiet part of Isaac’s brain thinks that’s sort of endearing, but now certainly isn’t the time for such an observation.)

“It used to look like two ordinary people,” Lydia says. “But, somehow, they merged. All we know is that it’s made of two faces. One human, the other supernatural.”

Something about that rings like an alarm in Isaac’s mind, but he blames it on the fear of the entire situation. This whole thing is one big warning bell, one big screaming cry to *run away*. And yet, they won’t. They *can’t*.

“It’s a shape-shifter just like us,” Scott adds. “But it knows what you’re afraid of – what you fear most.”

And that makes Isaac’s thoughts take pause, halting all at once and spiraling in the opposite direction. Because he hadn’t yet considered the prospect of actually facing this thing, the fast approaching reality of going up against his greatest fear.

The thing is: Isaac doesn't know what his greatest fear is.

Two and half years ago, it would've been his father, without contest and without a shadow of a doubt. It would've been his dad and Isaac would've known that without hesitation, but, now, Isaac's not so sure.

Isaac has grown so much in the past few years. And, sure, there's always going to be the lingering discomfort of small spaces and red-faced fathers, but it's not as harsh as it once was. Something in him has mended, has diluted the pain. It still hurts, always will – like a scar that didn't heal quite cleanly, that healed jagged and tight – but it's no longer excruciating. It's no longer a nightmare he can't wake up from, a pain in every elevator and every show of male authority.

So, Isaac doesn't think his dad is his worst fear. The fact that he could survive a few hours in a glorified closet with Jackson Whittemore without wolfing out seems like proof enough. The fact that he survived in an actual *freezer* to remember Stiles is just the cherry on top, the extra evidence he doesn't really need.

But then, what shape would the anuk-ite take?

Isaac thinks of the oni, of their glinting swords and the way they destroyed Allison and shattered his heart. But Isaac knows how to beat them now. Now, he just needs silver and they're nothing more than target practice.

Isaac thinks of the Dread Doctors, of their stomping feet and the way they used Theo to manipulate and destroy their pack bonds. But Isaac knows they're dead and gone now. Now, he knows they were an anomaly that *can't* be brought back. Now, he knows the pack is stronger than any pulling and pushing could penetrate.

Isaac thinks of the Ghost Riders, of the return of Allison and the stealing of his best friend. And maybe that's the worst threat they've ever faced. Because the Ghost Riders could come back with any storm, they could start taking people again, and Isaac's not sure if they would be able to win a second time, if they could replicate the diverting of a train without worlds falling in on each other.

Isaac thinks of the Ghost Riders and what they symbolize – the resurrection and re-grieving of friends long gone and the snatching and erasing of friends soon lost.

And Isaac knows what his worst fear is. He knows it's losing the pack: losing Scott, losing Stiles, losing Derek, losing *any* of them. What

scares Isaac the most is being alone again, of having everything he's built be taken from him, of being the one left behind again.

Maybe that's what the Ghost Riders symbolize, maybe that's the answer to Isaac's burning question.

Regardless, he hopes he never finds out. He hopes he never has to face the anuk-ite head on, hopes he never gets his answer, hopes he lives on in the unknown.

"And now it can kill you just by looking at you," Malia says, drawing Isaac out of his pondering and back into the present moment.

"Okay, so, you're telling me we gotta go up against this thing blind? And face our biggest fear?" Braeden asks. Her neck juts forward and her eyebrows raise in an incredulous and humorlessly smirking expression.

"Yep, pretty much," Stiles says, like he recognizes exactly how horrible this sounds, exactly how hopeless.

Scott mostly just speaks over them, trying to get them back on track, back into something motivated, something moving forward with momentum. "We have to divide and conquer, so who goes where?"

"My dad can get Parrish out of Eichen, and then they can rescue your dad together," Stiles says, quickly shifting gears and getting focused. He says it like it's the most obvious suggestion in the world, but Isaac stares at him with narrowed eyes.

"Your... dad?" Isaac repeats. "Can get Parrish out of Eichen? All by himself?"

"Yes," Stiles says without elaboration and without any shred of doubt.

Isaac decides not to question him any further, decides they definitely don't have the time for Stiles puffing up his chest and reacting in exasperated faux anger. So, instead, Isaac just shrugs as if to say, *you know him best*.

"What about the hospital?" Scott asks.

Isaac has this awful idea at the back of his mind, this stupid blurting of, "Theo?"

All eyes turn on him in an instant. He's met with six shared

expressions of shock and surprise and confusion. It's a swirling mixture of incredulity from each and every one of them, but, if Stiles didn't give an explanation to his father, then Isaac won't give an explanation either.

(Mostly, Isaac just doesn't know what to say, doesn't know how to articulate the complex feelings he has for Theo Raeken. And, really, none of that is relevant right now anyway.)

"Liam and Corey can hold their own, but they could probably use an extra set of hands, especially if Mason and my mom are there. So, yeah, sure. Theo it is," Scott says. He doesn't sound unsure or unsettled. He sounds certain and calm. It washes over Isaac like a balm to his racing heart and his own fried nerves. Then, he keeps talking with the next assignment of, "Lydia, Isaac, Stiles: you three find Argent. Get to the armory and recuse Jackson."

Isaac immediately wants to protest. He feels this tingling of wrong in his chest at the mere idea of separating from Scott right before the final battle, right before the last push towards victory, but he doesn't speak on it. Because he knows it's the right thing to do. Because he's *still* recovering from the wolfsbane poison, because he *promised* Jackson he'd be back, and because he knows *exactly* where he's located inside the armory.

"I don't think we have time to wait for Argent," Lydia says simply. And, "I've gotten through those doors before. I can do it again."

Scott gives her a brief nod, but doesn't get a chance to give a verbal affirmation before Braeden speaks up, cutting over the group with, "Sorry, so we're actually doing this? We're going to do exactly what Gerard wants us to?"

Stiles throws a thumb over his shoulder, pointing at Braeden like she might have some kind of point, like this might not be the wisest decision. But the thing is: they don't have any other options. Gerard has laid out the pieces and now they have to play the game – now they have to *win*.

"I think that, if we stop the anuk-ite," Scott says, only partly answering her question, carrying with him a depth of intensity, "we stop it all."

"Stopping this thing can stop Gerard and the hunters?" Derek asks, sounding only a little disbelieving, more confirming than anything else.

“Not all of them *are* hunters,” Scott says, volume dipping and head shaking faintly.

“He’s right,” Lydia says, voice similarly soft. “Most of them are ordinary people acting out of fear.”

“Monroe and Gerard aren’t going to change, but I think that we can reach the others,” Scott says, so full of sincerity that Isaac can’t help but believe him – *trust* him. “Most of them, actually.”

Isaac adds, looking at Derek when he says it, a hint of implication written between the lines of, “The anuk-ite is causing them to come from a place of fear.”

Derek catches the insinuation easily, molding it into his own words of, “Yeah, fear’s pretty motivating, especially when it leads to anger.”

“I think that if we can take *out* the fear, we can take out the *fight* in them too,” Scott says, hand hitting the table in the enthusiasm of his determination, his unwillingness to give in or give out or give up. “They’re afraid of us, but they don’t have to be. They just have to change their minds.”

“*We* have to change their minds,” Derek aptly corrects.

The room goes quiet for a moment. Because the burden isn’t on the hunters. The responsibility of this fight goes to them. They have to be the ones to stop the anuk-ite, they have to be the ones to prove them wrong, they have to be the ones to clean up the mess they made.

“Okay,” Malia says, and it’s so clear that she’s trying to sound positive, that she’s trying to convince herself that this isn’t impossible, that they *can* do this. “We can face the anuk-ite, we can try to fight it blind, we can try to face our fears.” She turns to Scott, “But we still need to know how to *catch* it.”

“We’ll figure that out, we always do,” Scott says indisputably.

And Isaac knows, right down deep in his soul, that Scott is right. Because there’s still this shivering, tingling, glimmering at the back of Isaac’s mind, something that tells him the solution is *right there*. They’re close, Isaac knows it.

“It’s nice to see that somebody hasn’t lost their optimism,” Derek says with a smug sort of smile and something proud underneath. It’s a contagious sort of grin that filters onto Isaac’s face too, spreads like a

splitting of his features.

“Not yet,” Scott says, easy as anything.

“I have,” Stiles mumbles, but they all know he’s joking. They all know he’s using humor to try to diffuse the burning tension of the room.

“We’ll buy you time, Scott,” Lydia says, ignoring Stiles’ sarcasm with only a sideways glance in his direction. And, “Who knows, maybe Jackson has an answer.”

“Maybe Argent will come back with one,” Malia adds.

Scott gives them each a grateful sort of nod. Then, speaking to Malia, Braeden and Derek, “You three are with me.” Shockingly, he adds, “And we need Peter – anyone who can help stop this thing or slow it down.”

Isaac doesn’t particularly like the idea of relying on Peter, but he knows Scott is right. They’re in the endgame now, and they’re going to need all the help they can get.

“Where are we headed?” Malia asks.

“The high school,” Scott answers. Because *of course* that’s where they’re going.

“The high school?” Derek repeats, like Scott has to be joking. “That’s where we’re going to find this thing?”

“No,” Scott shakes his head, lifting his eyes from the metal of the table and up to lock with Derek’s. “It’ll find us.”

—

Isaac and Scott don’t know *how* to say goodbye. Isaac doesn’t ever want to have to learn. He wants to keep doing this forever, just the tightest hug and a whisper of “*I love you*” and a brief kiss before parting. That’s all he can ask for, really.

That’s all he wants and that’s all he gets before climbing into the passenger side of the Jeep. He lets Stiles drive while Lydia follows behind them in her own car, and, together, the three of them make their way towards the armory.

They drive like they’re going home after a long day, like they aren’t heading out to fight a war. They drive with the radio on and Stiles

humming along and drumming on the steering wheel. Isaac settles himself in this moment, in the familiarity of the two of them and this car and these habits. He settles himself in the knowledge that, if this is his last moment of peace, then it'll be a good one.

He enjoys the comfortable silence that stretches between them as best he can until the shape of the armory comes into view and reality creeps in. The radio gets turned off and the quiet turns stifling without Stiles' out of key humming.

They pull into a parking spot and it strikes Isaac as such a huge juxtaposition that he almost laughs. They're here to break into the building, and yet Stiles parks perfectly between painted white lines. It's such a stark contrast of mundane and absurd, but Isaac pointedly *doesn't* laugh and doesn't say a word.

He just climbs out of the car alongside Stiles and Lydia, joining them in a tiny group huddle.

"Ready, team?" Stiles says, all bad humor and joking lilt.

Lydia rolls her eyes and Isaac breaks the circle without saying a thing. Lydia follows after him, leaving Stiles in the dust with a sputtering sort of protest coming from his lips as he jogs to catch up.

Isaac spares a glance towards Lydia, letting her beautiful green eyes placate him in the darkness of the night sky. He knows he can count on her, just as he can count on Stiles. He knows that the three of them can handle this, can handle *anything*.

And so, as they take out the first guard and break in through the first door, Isaac only feels certain that, at the very least, *this* part of the plan is going to work. They're going to succeed.

—

There's a whole slew of hunters guarding the door of Jackson's cell. There's at least five of them and way more than Isaac had to face on his way out of here, but, between the three of them, they make quick work of their enemies.

Isaac knocks the first hunter's gun right out of his hands – it's starting to become something of routine – sending it clattering to the floor before punching the guy square in the face. He imagines that it's Gerard, imagines it's his wrinkled skin contorting under the blow of his knuckles. It works well enough to get his adrenaline and anger

pumping, to get the hunter slamming his head against the wall and falling out of consciousness.

Gunfire and screams make for a fighting soundtrack as a second hunter comes at Isaac. He ducks under his gun and manages to loop around the guard. Then, attacking from the side, Isaac grabs him by the collar of his shirt and slams the hunter's head down into his knee. Isaac hears the sick crunch of bone breaking and watches as blood drips over his own leg and down the hunter's neck. And, without ceremony, Isaac uses his grip to throw him against the wall, joining his buddy in a pile at the bottom.

And then, when Isaac looks up to continue fighting, the rest of the hunters are already incapacitated. Stiles is shaking out one of his hands, suggesting he also attempted a punch of attack, but Isaac knows it's Lydia who deserves most of the credit, who did most of the work. Isaac knows Parrish trained her in jiu jitsu and knows that her voice is a weapon all on its own.

Now that the guards are down for the count, Lydia tells Stiles to back away from the door as she readies herself to tear it down. She sucks in a big breath of air, holds her arms out in front of her to push the noise forward, and then...

She *screams*.

Lydia makes her voice not just one bullet, but ten. The door buckles under the force of her sound waves, metal warping and twisting and groaning. Until, eventually, the whole thing gives out and tips forward and into the cell. It hits the ground with a heavy clang and a quiet echo.

Jackson Whittemore stands there, staring at the fallen door with eyes wide, but he doesn't get a chance to say anything because Lydia is shrieking his name, shrieking with, "Jackson!" Her scream has nothing on the high pitched tone of her squeal, "Oh my god, it's you!" And then she's running and jumping into his arms, colliding in a hug and a final squeak of, "It's you! I can't believe it's you."

Lydia is gasping in relief and something like shock and Jackson is hugging her back just as tightly, arms sliding around her waist and seeming just as overjoyed to see her as she is to see him. It's touching, in a way that Isaac will literally *never* admit.

Instead, he spends the duration of their hug trying not to laugh at the absolutely and entirely uncomfortable look on Stiles' face, the way his

hands find his hips and he's saying, "Okay. That's enough. Watch the hands."

Isaac's definitely smirking and it's definitely unbecoming, but the whole thing is hilarious in that way of leading up to a punchline that no one else suspects, that no one else sees coming.

"Okay, all right, let's just break that up," Stiles says.

And Lydia and Jackson do, separating from each other only to stare in wonder. Lydia's grinning like Isaac has barely seen since the night this war began, and it's worth it being back here, once again in the company of Jackson Whittemore, if it means witnessing that uninhibited glee.

Jackson looks past Lydia to the torn down door and the collapsed bodies on the ground, "You—" he looks back at Lydia, "You did that?"

Lydia glances over her shoulder, then turns back around with a casual shrug despite the way that she's still breathless, and admits, still smiling in a way that should almost be inappropriate with the body count behind her, "Yeah, I did that."

Isaac could protest, could say that he helped, but he's enjoying the shocked look on Jackson's face too much for that. He looks impressed, looks almost surprised by the damage Lydia has caused. It reminds Isaac that Lydia Martin has always been a force of nature, Jackson was just the last one to figure it out.

Stiles, the first to realize it, says, "Okay, are we going? We should go."

"Uh," Jackson says, swallowing and mellowing out in the aftermath of the reunion. "Not without Ethan."

"Ethan?" Lydia asks as Jackson steps between the three of them to get through the busted down door. Her voice loses some of its enthusiasm, shifting into a bewildered, "What's Ethan doing here?"

Jackson stops just as quickly as he starts. He turns around, looking at Isaac for probably the first time since the door was opened. He glares at him a little, "You couldn't have filled them in on this part, Lahey?"

And it seems that they're back to last names, but Isaac doesn't really mind. He merely shrugs in a falsely faultless and completely unapologetic way.

“He’s with me,” Jackson says, going for the same reveal tactic as before.

Lydia steps over a body, repeating, “He’s with you?”

“Yes,” Jackson says, leveling her with a look full of secret meanings and underlying intentions. “Me.”

“Ethan?” Stiles questions.

“Yes,” Jackson says. “Ethan.”

“And... you?” Lydia asks, slow and dragged out.

“Ethan?” Stiles repeats.

“Yeah,” Jackson breathes, and there’s a fire behind his eyes, a certain anger that Isaac really shouldn’t be getting this much enjoyment out of, but, well.

Stiles opens and closes his mouth a few times, ending with his cheeks puffed up and a sideways glance towards Isaac. His eyes are fraught with confusion, an indiscernible question swimming in the amber brown. But, as soon as he looks at Isaac, at the smarmy smirk on his face, his eyes narrow into a glare, one that says, *you knew about this, didn’t you?*

Isaac draws on a not-so-wholesome smile as his answer.

“Oh. My. God.” Lydia says, expression completely blank before it transforms into something like a sigh of relief and, “I thought you’d never figure it out.”

Jackson scoffs and shakes his head, like that’s so typical of Lydia, like he’s not surprised in the slightest. His earlier annoyance turns to a soft smile and an almost pleading sort of, “Can we go find him now?”

There’s something vulnerable there and, truthfully, none of them can deny him.

—

They find Ethan quickly, tracking him by scent into a distant corner of the armory, tucked behind a shelf of weapons and an arsenal of ways to survive a werewolf. He’s struggling on the ground, panting for breath like he’s trying to get up or escape, but doesn’t have the strength.

He glances up and sees Jackson and his eyes light with something Isaac recognizes from the way Scott looks at him.

“How did you get out before me?” Ethan questions, bringing levity to the air as Jackson runs towards him, ducking down to his knees in a fluid motion.

Jackson shrugs a little, tipping his head to one side, “I talked my way out of it.”

Ethan stares at him like he doesn’t quite buy that. And, with the recognition of someone who knows Jackson well, “You used the tail, didn’t you?”

The words are out of Isaac’s mouth before he can properly assess whether they’re appropriate or not, “You still have a tail?”

“So gross,” Ethan says, looking away from Jackson for the first time and looking up at Isaac. Their eyes meet and Isaac expects to feel that old flare of animosity, but, instead, he feels nothing. The anger feels like nothing more than a distant memory, a struggle of days past.

Ethan appears as assessing as Isaac is, his eyes squinting and flicking up and down. Then, when they meet with Isaac’s, he says, “You’re not going to beat me up again, are you?”

Isaac flushes a little at the memory there, at beating up Ethan because Scott was hurt and unhealing. (And Isaac still can’t discern when like became more than like became love, but looking back on that school bus feels like an insight, feels like a hint towards the question he’ll never be able to answer.) Isaac simply shrugs and smirks a little in a camouflaging sort of way, a cover up for vulnerabilities, and, “The jury’s still out.”

“Can you just get up?” Jackson asks, cutting through the conversation with impatience in his tone. He coats his voice with mock irritation even as he extends a helping hand to Ethan.

Ethan takes it with a smile and stars in his eyes and lets Jackson drag him up to standing.

And then, they should run. They should run and flee. Except, that’s when Isaac’s phone rings, when he gets a call from Scott and hears the words, “*I know how to stop the anuk-ite.*” And, “*Mountain ash.*”

It all comes back to Isaac then. The epiphany he never quite reached,

the idea he never quite formed. The rules of the supernatural that *can't* be broken.

They split up. Lydia, Jackson, and Ethan take her car to the school to get a head start in finding the anuk-ite and helping Scott. Meanwhile, Isaac and Stiles take the Jeep back to the animal clinic to prepare in a well known setting.

“Okay, so, are you going to explain Scott’s cryptic idea then? Or am I just going to have to trust the two of you with the lives of everyone we care about?” Stiles rambles. There’s a frenetic energy swirling around him and a frantic edge to his voice. And, “I mean, I totally do. Trust you, I mean. But—”

“Stiles,” Isaac interrupts, not quite shouting, but not too far off from it either.

“Isaac,” Stiles repeats with the same sort of inflection. It’s slightly teasing in a way that’s far too carefree for the stakes they’re up against, but it works. It helps ease some of the tension in the room, helps Isaac breathe a little easier.

“The merged anuk-ite is far too powerful to be defeated.” Because that’s the crux of this theory, this discovery made by Scott and understood by Isaac. The main idea lies in the fact that they can’t fight this thing blind, face their worst fears, and win. It’s too much. “*But*,” Isaac says, “if we can separate the two halves again, then I think we’d stand a chance.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, like Isaac is only stating the obvious, like he hasn’t given him enough information yet. And, truthfully, Isaac hasn’t. “So... how do – how do we do that? You know how to do that, right? You’re not expecting me to figu—”

“Stiles!” Isaac repeats. And, this time, he actually is shouting. “We don’t have time for this. Please let me talk!”

Stiles mimes zipping his lips shut and throwing away the key. It’s completely ridiculous, but so completely Stiles that Isaac has to take a second just to smile.

Then, “It’s half-werewolf and half-human. So, if one half has to comply with the rules of the supernatural and the other doesn’t...”

Isaac sets the jar of mountain ash on the table, watching as the realization dawns in Stiles' eyes, as he recognizes the implications of the words and the plan on the horizon.

He says, a little in awe, "That might actually work."

Isaac grins at him.

Isaac and Stiles arrive at the school, stepping out of the Jeep and into the parking lot. And, for a brief moment, they just stand there. They just stand there under the glow of the not quite full moon and the not quite clear sky, staring out at the building that has housed so many battles over the years.

Isaac can't help but hope that this is the last.

Then, the moment breaks, and they're walking towards Beacon Hills High School in complete silence. It feels like they should be running, like they should be rushing against time and sprinting fast and hard, but they just walk. And maybe it's unwise, maybe it's a stupid thing to do, but they walk up to the building and push open the blue double doors with a quiet creaking of the hinges.

The first thing Isaac notices is the feeling in the air. It's like static electricity, like tension and tunnel vision. The atmosphere feels thick and crackling. It feels distorted and fumbling, like the world has tilted just slightly to the left, like everything's a little off balance.

It's the anuk-ite, Isaac knows.

The thrum of fear starts at Isaac's scalp and trickles down his neck and over his arms and into his fingers. It pours over him like rain in the winter, like something that feels wrong and chilled and wrong again. It settles in his bones and makes itself at home there.

The second thing Isaac notices is the stone statue in front of them. It's so close and so out of place and so awkwardly large in the hallway that it probably should've been the first thing to draw Isaac's attention. Though, really, that just proves the overbearing effect, the unshakable presence of the anuk-ite. That just proves how formidable it really is, how strong its waves of power are, how they can knock you back and send you reeling.

Isaac takes a single step towards the statue and recognizes the features

at once.

It's Peter. The statue is dusty and slightly less detailed than real life, but it's undeniably so.

Isaac turns his head to look at Stiles, to see if he's seeing the same thing. And, if the widening of his eyes and the catching of his breath are anything to go by, then he definitely is.

Peter Hale is turned to stone in front of them. His upper body is twisted a little, like he was trying to turn and flee, but the anuk-ite got to him before his feet could leave the floor. There's fear written in his expression, frozen in the statue of his appearance, forever embedded in time.

And Isaac doesn't care for Peter. He doesn't even *like* Peter. But he never wanted this to happen. He never really wanted him to get hurt, to be killed, to be gone.

Because that's what this is. Peter is *gone*, Peter was taken, Peter is—

Isaac stares at the statue and has no idea what to do. He doesn't know how to fix this, he doesn't know how to bring him back. He doesn't know if this *can* be undone. He doesn't know how to make this better, to melt the stone, to bring back the taunting and snarking form of Peter Hale, the infuriating man who Isaac hates, but wants to save regardless.

Isaac doesn't know what to do, but he knows what he *has* to do. He has to get the mountain ash to Scott, and that means leaving Peter here. They have to move on and hope that this isn't as permanent as it looks.

And so, Isaac whispers a, “come on,” to Stiles, and then they side step around the stone form.

They only make it a few feet before another obstacle crosses their path.

This time, it's Monroe.

She steps into the hallway with a clicking of her boots on the vinyl floor, a cocking of her gun, and a smirk that slides across her face like a knife cutting through skin. Her arrogance pours like blood over her lips, like the chilling words of, “You stole something from me, didn't you?”

Isaac meets Monroe head on. He doesn't flinch and he doesn't cower. There's fear pooling in him now, but Isaac is no stranger to the sensation. He's no stranger to oppressing figures with domineering smiles.

Isaac doesn't take his eyes off Monroe, but he does shove Stiles a little, saying, "Get to Scott. I'll handle this."

Stiles hesitates for half a second. Isaac can feel his eyes boring holes into the side of his face, but he doesn't let himself turn to look. As much as Isaac wants to, as much as he wants to reassure and find solace in that connection, he knows he can't bear the risk of turning his back on Monroe. So, he just keeps pinning her down with his gaze until Stiles takes off running towards the library, leaving just the echo of his footsteps behind him.

Only when Stiles is gone does Isaac make a move. He takes one long striding step towards Monroe, and says with his own smirk coming to rest along his features, "It was a good effort, Monroe, it really was." He takes another step. "But we've figured it out." Another. "And you're going to lose."

Monroe lifts her gun, aiming to shoot, but she's too late. Isaac is too close and too fast. He ducks under the barrel and swings around to her other side. She tries to follow in the motion, shooting nonsensically with bullets showering against the metal of the lockers. Her grip on the shotgun is white knuckled and glued tight, like she has no interest in dropping her weapon. And, really, Isaac can't blame her for that.

But Isaac refuses to give up the yellow wolfsbane. He refuses to let it fall into her hands when he knows she'll be using it to kill Scott.

Isaac won't let that happen. He just won't.

And so, he has to keep Monroe occupied. He has to keep her distracted long enough for Stiles to get to Scott, for the two of them to save the day as they always do.

He just has to keep Monroe busy, and he does that by avoiding her gunfire and evading her movements. He doesn't swing at her, doesn't try to punch back or land a blow. He doesn't want to give Monroe any more reason to be angry or hateful. He just wants to keep her cornered in this hallway, away from the library and Scott and out of reach of the wolfsbane bullet.

Isaac continues dodging her bullets and spinning her in circles. He

continues keeping her in place and keeping her from gaining momentum. He continues in distracting her until another set of footsteps join the hallway.

Isaac stops in his tracks for half a second, stops long enough to get a look at...

“Go,” Braeden says, cocking her gun, “I’ve got this.”

Isaac doesn’t hesitate in believing her. He knows Braeden and he knows her prowess. He knows she could kill Monroe if she wanted, knows she won’t let herself be hurt. He knows that Braeden will survive this.

He knows and so he runs.

He runs down the hallway, looping towards the library at record speed, following only the feeling of panic and the sound of two racing heartbeats.

The closer Isaac gets the thicker the air feels. It’s like there’s an invisible current trying to push him back, trying to shove him over, trying to keep him away. It’s a tangible sort of fear that runs heavy and weighted and suffocating. It’s a fear that Isaac has to run into, has to push past, has to break through.

It ripples along Isaac’s skin, bursting like fireworks of loss. It feels like Scott’s already dead, like Stiles isn’t far behind him, like Derek is incapable of saving. It feels like everything’s too far away, like Isaac is already alone, like he’s never going to beat this.

But Isaac doesn’t give into the fear. He holds onto the sliver of light in his chest, the place in his heart reserved for people like Allison Argent and determination at the final moment, motivation despite an utter lack of guarantee. He holds onto the last shred of hope that he still has, the miniscule drop of optimism and the knowledge that his pack needs *him*.

Isaac runs against the fear and sprints around the corner, skidding to a stop just as the mountain ash is flying through the air, just as it’s colliding with the merged form of the anuk-ite, with its skinless frame and glowing purple eyes.

For a moment, nothing happens. For a moment, everything goes still.

And then, the two halves begin to split. The human and the

supernatural sides war with each other, fighting against the pull of connection and the rules that have to be followed, that have to be *obeyed*. They swirl together and push apart, a messy collision of two pieces that no longer match, two pieces that can no longer fit.

It's a fight against nature. It's a wrongness that can't be denied.

The anuk-ite can't come back into one being, but it isn't stopping either. It isn't dying and it isn't being defeated. Something's not working, something's not quite right. It isn't enough, they haven't *done* enough.

Isaac feels a weight in his pocket. It's a heavy resting on his shoulders and a comforting familiarity.

An idea comes to Isaac and he acts before the thought is even fully formed. They don't have time to discuss it, they don't have time to think this through. In a last ditch effort, Isaac simply shoves his hand in his pocket and pulls out the yellow wolfsbane bullet.

But it's not the only thing in his pocket.

A ring dagger comes with it, and, in that moment, Isaac knows what he's going to do. He knows what he has to try. He doesn't know if it's going to work, but he knows they're out of options and they're out of time.

He has to do something.

And so, Isaac crushes the bullet in his hand. He shatters the see through glass tip and feels the wolfsbane drip over his palm. It burns on impact, sending zinging sparks of agony into his flesh and up his wrist, like it's seeping into his bones and into his veins.

Isaac can't fight the whimpering sound that forms at the base of his throat, but he can fight through the pain. He can ignore it as it smarts and sizzles, he can focus instead on letting the yellow liquid coat the ring dagger. It drips over the blade and covers the knife-sharp edge with an amber glow of sticky honey.

Then, Isaac takes aim and *throws*. He aims at the swirling form of the two halves of the anuk-ite, at the budding war between them and the fight against the mountain ash. He aims and he throws, and, for half a second, Isaac thinks the dagger is going to go right through. For a half a second, he thinks this isn't going to work, he thinks nothing's going to happen.

But then, the dagger hits with a decidedly human *thud*.

The anuk-ite's merged body comes back together and falls to the ground. It's dead.

Isaac runs to Scott. He really *sees* him for the first time since his arrival, but Scott isn't seeing him. Scott's eyes are shut and running with blood. It's not hard for Isaac to realize what he did, to realize that Scott blinded himself to try to save everyone – to try to save *Isaac*.

"I had to, I'm sorry," Scott whispers as Isaac crashes down in front of him, as he cradles his face in one hand. (The other is still burning faintly, still tingling with the ache of his palm wiped messy over his shirt, the smearing of yellow that seems to have settled in his cells.) "I'm sorry, Iz," Scott repeats. And he knows that it's Isaac without seeing him, without hearing a word from his lips. He knows from his scent and the sound of his heart and the careful hand against him. He just knows.

Isaac strokes gently with his thumb, whispers, "It's okay. It's okay, Scott. We did it. It's over. The anuk-ite's dead."

"*You* did it," Scott says back, tone soft and a little broken. There's a smile at the corner of his mouth, but Isaac can taste the pain in the air and he knows that Scott's not really okay.

"Scott, you have to heal," comes Derek's gruff voice from over Isaac's shoulder. Isaac glances back at him only long enough to see the dust sticking to his beard, and maybe that should be more concerning than it is. Maybe Isaac should be remembering Peter and the stone statue in the hallway, but all he can focus on is Scott and the truth in Derek's warning of, "If your eyes stay like this much longer, the damage is gonna be permanent."

"Come on, Scott. Concentrate," says Stiles.

Isaac looks at Scott, at the way he's rocking back against the steps of the library, at the way he's panting with frustration.

"I'm trying..." he grits. "I'm trying, but it's not working. I can't – I can't focus."

Isaac does the only thing he can and grabs Scott's hand, his wrist, his

forearm. He covers Scott with his clean palm and he imagines a magnet between, imagines its force pulling in Scott's agony.

He imagines it, and then it happens. Black suddenly flows up the veins of his hands, spider webbing up his arm and under the sleeves of his shirt. It tingles with an ache, an almost *buzzing* in Isaac's skin. It tickles his nerves and grates along his muscles and pulls up and up and up.

He takes and he remembers how Deaton taught him this trick, taught him what he could do for others, what he could do for *Scott*. He remembers how he cried when it happened. He remembers the first time he ever saw himself as a potential source of good in the world. It all started there. With Scott and with Isaac's trust for him.

Scott heals and his eyelids open. They flutter against the dim light of the library, opening without seeing for just a moment, just a moment of readjustment.

And then... brown eyes meet blue.

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Word count: 6,081

Chapter Notes

A year ago today, I wrote the first chapter of *Because I Trust You*.
Now, a year later, I share with you the last. — ☼ ☾ ☿

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's Isaac's third and final time moving out of the loft.

It's nothing like the first, when he was forced into the cover of darkness, when rain pelted down from above, when he sprinted following only the arrow of instinct, when he showed up dripping wet on Scott McCall's doorstep.

It's nothing like the second either, when he was more scared than he was excited, when he was more apprehensive than he was ready, when he was restless with impatience, when he felt like, if he didn't leave right then, then he'd never get another chance.

This is something else entirely. This is a barren mattress and empty drawers. This is his hand gliding over the banister of the spiral staircase, ghosting along the edge of the metal table, pressing into the plush cushions of the couch.

This is goodbye.

And, this time, Isaac is ready for it.

This is a goodbye that Isaac is ready to say. It breaks and bends, but he's no longer terrified like he was before. He's no longer dreading this with every fiber of his being. Now, he's prepared.

Now, three and half months after the end of the war, this moment has settled in his bones with a feeling of *right*. It's time.

And so, Isaac takes one last lap around the loft, one last passing of his fingertips over every surface. And then, he steps out into the hall.

He's not alone in the hallway. Theo Raeken stands by the elevator with a bag slung over his shoulder and an absolutely frightened look on his face.

Isaac wasn't expecting to see him today, wasn't expecting to have this conversation, but he's not necessarily surprised by it either. He's not surprised that Theo wants answers, that he wants some explanation of *why*.

Still, Isaac doesn't say anything until Theo does. Until he says, "Uh." And, "Look, I know this wasn't Derek's idea, so just. Tell me why."

There's a combative tone to his voice, something almost angry in the grit of it, in the enunciation of every consonant. But Isaac knows it's more for show than anything else, more a way to hide the vulnerability of asking questions, of being curious.

Isaac maintains the gap of space, the few feet between them, to keep Theo from feeling cornered. And then...

"Because we're not as different as you think," Isaac says.

Theo just stares at him. The clenching of his jaw goes slack, but his mouth doesn't open and his eyes don't widen. There's no tangible shock there, but Isaac can sense it anyway. In the minute shifting of his chemosignals and the twitching of his fingers over the strap of his bag.

"Because I didn't start out on the right side of things either," Isaac admits. "Because when I needed somewhere to stay, Scott opened his doors to me without a second thought. Because it was that unconditional kindness and guaranteed security that gave me the space to grow."

And, now, Theo rolls his eyes, like Isaac is being purposefully sentimental and gross, like he'd rather be anywhere else.

Isaac pushes on regardless. Because he doesn't really want to be here either, standing in the hallway with Theo Raeken, but he can't quite walk away yet.

"Because everyone deserves a second chance," Isaac says. Finishes with, "And I guess that includes you."

Theo doesn't say a word, but Isaac sees the way the words ripple over him, the way they set in and absorb, the way they take effect. He sees

his bag slip down a notch, sees his eyes go a little hazy and unfocused. He sees how he goes tight with something uncomfortable and, well, *seen*.

Isaac puts Theo out of his misery. He throws a thumb over his shoulder, pointing to the door of the loft, and says, "The code is 2-5-5-4-7-6-6."

And Isaac knows what name those numbers spell out alphanumerically, but Theo doesn't need to, so he doesn't explain. He simply readjusts his own grip on his own duffel bag and steps around Theo to press the button of the elevator.

He hears Theo's footsteps on the floor, hears him insert the alarm code, but he doesn't turn around to look at him. He stares intently forward until the doors of the elevator grind open and he steps inside without a beat of hesitation.

—

The coffee shop is quiet, but not completely empty. Lydia Martin sits at a table along the window with two steaming mugs in front of her.

Isaac approaches her with a smile and a small wave. He pulls back his chair with a harsh squeaking against the floor, earning him a disgruntled look from Lydia, who grimaces but simply says, "I ordered for you. I hope you don't mind. Breakfast tea with honey and lemon, yes?"

Isaac has no idea how she knows that, but he nods mutely, a little dumbfounded.

Lydia pushes one of the mugs closer to him with pretty manicured fingers and a smile painted with warm peach lipstick. She tugs her own drink closer, takes a sip as the smell of strong coffee wafts up to Isaac's nose.

"So," she says, with a soft clatter of the mug meeting the table once more, "are you going to tell me why I'm here?"

Isaac nods again. He takes a sip of his tea, lets it scald down his throat for something of a distraction, for something to settle the instinctive nerves in his stomach. Then, he meets Lydia's green green green eyes, and says, "I want you to draw my tattoo."

Lydia, for her part, doesn't actually look all that surprised. Her face

stays mostly blank, other than the lifting of a perfect eyebrow, but Isaac knows her well enough by now to notice the tiniest uptick in her heartbeat, the tapping of her nails against ceramic, the tiny movements that give her away.

“And why can’t you draw it?” Lydia asks, head tilting just slightly to one side, eyes narrowing in inspection. “Did we not take an art class together?”

“You’re... better at art than me,” Isaac tries, but knows instantly that he’s failed.

Lydia rolls her eyes, scoffing a little with quiet amusement. And, unimpressed and testing, she presses, “Isaac.”

Isaac sighs. His left thumb finds the mottled, scarred skin of his right palm – Derek says it still might heal fully, with more time and more full moons, but Isaac doesn’t really mind it either way. He traces over the bumpy texture in soothing circles, and, “All right, fine. I could easily draw it myself, but I want *you* to do it. The art class is how we first really bonded and I–”

“Okay,” Lydia cuts him off. A faint smile twitches at the corner of her lips, something secretly pleased and touched. “I’ll draw it,” she gives in. “But you’re going to need to explain it better than you did before because those wiggly hand motions meant *nothing* to me. Seriously, how much time *have* you been spending with Stiles?”

“About as much as you,” Isaac says, smirk sliding up his features.

Lydia huffs a breath of, “Oh. I see how it is.”

Isaac smiles at her, all easy happiness and fake innocence.

“When do you need the drawing?” Lydia asks, taking another drag of coffee and pushing past Isaac’s snark.

Isaac presses the button of his phone, bringing up a smiling picture of Scott and an analog clock. He looks up at Lydia with something sheepish in his expression, admits, “Two hours?”

Lydia laughs, drops her facade and goes fully genuine in something endeared and happy. “Wow,” she says. “This was quite presumptuous of you. What were you going to do if I said no?”

Isaac shrugs, “I knew you wouldn’t.” And, “Besides, you owe me for

the humiliation of, ‘come back when the bike you ride to school has an engine, not a chain.’”

Lydia’s lips press into a line to hide her own mirth, to hide the humor at their first real interaction with each other. Then, with a click of stained lips parting, “I don’t owe you anything.”

Isaac shrugs again. “But you’ll draw it?”

“Sure,” is all Lydia says.

And so, Isaac launches into an explanation of his first tattoo, all the while drinking after-nightmare tea and basking in the glow of Lydia Martin’s presence.

—

Isaac stands in front of a familiar brick house. The plants outside have gone a little wild, have lost some of their definition and turned into something overgrown and overwhelming, but the house underneath is the same as it ever was.

Isaac still has an hour and a half before his appointment, but it feels like he’s cutting it close regardless. It feels like he’s rushing, like his heart is beating too fast and his thoughts are running too quick. So, for a moment, he just stands outside the house. For a moment, he just stands and stares and takes it all in.

For a moment, he just slows himself down.

Until Parrish says, “Before we go in...”

Isaac turns his eyes away from the house to look at him, at the non-uniformed clothes hanging on his shoulders and the nervous glint in his hazel eyes. Isaac has a pretty good idea what’s coming and he knows he can’t stop it, so he just looks at Parrish and lets their eyes meet and waits.

He waits for, “Sheriff Stilinski and I talked about it and... you were right. We never should have made that deal with Theo. It wasn’t fair to him.”

Isaac nods. He doesn’t really know what to say. Because things with Theo have been patched up in a way that Isaac never would’ve guessed or expected, and because it’s too late to go back and fix the mistakes of the past.

Now, Isaac can only hope that the future will be better, that Stilinski will have finally opened his eyes to his bias and the need for further compassion.

Isaac doesn't say anything to Parrish, in the end. All he does is start walking towards the house, listening behind him as Parrish follows with shoes grinding against the sidewalk.

—

The house hasn't changed much since the last time Isaac was here. It's still dark and dusty and quiet, still feels haunted around the edges. But, this time, Isaac isn't alone. This time, Parrish walks beside him.

They collect any pictures they can find – ones of only Isaac and Camden, leaving the rest of the family behind – and create a small stack on the kitchen table.

Isaac's trying very hard to not to think about his last night in this house and the glass shattering against the wall, against the pictures hanging there, against the frames that he sets aside with the others. It's difficult, when there are still shards of it decorating the hardwood floors, but Isaac does his best to keep his breathing steady, to keep himself from shaking right out of his skin.

When it inevitably gets to be too much, Isaac wanders off in the direction of the bedrooms, passing the basement door without much more than a sideways glance.

And Parrish doesn't follow him, seems to know that Isaac has to do this part on his own.

He walks alone down the hallway and comes to a fork in the road, caught between a decision: into his own bedroom or into Camden's.

He stands there for a moment frozen. Because he knows what he's here for, knows what he needs to do, but knowing doesn't make it any easier. Having a plan doesn't make his heartbeat any less erratic, doesn't quell the damage of his splintering resolve and the splitting open of old wounds.

He stands there for a moment frozen, then he pushes open Camden's door.

He's not sure what he's expecting to happen. Immediate tears, maybe. Or drowning waves of pain, more than likely.

But, instead, all Isaac's greeted with is a thin layer of grime and a plaid comforter and sunshine pouring in through the room's only window. It hits Isaac's skin and warms him up and makes everything feel *wrong*.

Because this should be a cold and dark affair. This should be a horrible feeling, but, instead, it's... nice.

Instead, Isaac steps into Camden's bedroom and he feels this awful weight lifting off his shoulders. He breathes in and it's like he can still smell him, like he can still imagine him in this space.

Because it hasn't changed at all. Because everything is right where he left it.

Isaac goes weak in the knees at the thought, staggers over to Cam's bed, lets himself sink into the mattress that feels familiar even after all these years. He imagines he can trace the imprint of Camden's sleeping form in the covers, imagines he can still feel the warmth of his body heat.

Isaac tips his head back and looks up at the ceiling and just breathes for a moment.

It shakes out of his lungs and shudders past his lips. It seeps into the room, mixing with the sunlight, and taints this time sheltered place with something new and living, something foreign that's never existed here before.

Because Isaac is so different from who he used to be. He's no longer the same kid that used to duck under this bed during hide and seek. He's not sure if that's a good thing or not. He's not sure if he's better or worse, and he's fairly certain that he'll never know precisely.

All he knows is that *he's* different, but this space isn't.

Isaac gets off the bed and moves to kneel on the floor, moves to stretch his arm under the dark space of the bed frame. He probably wouldn't fit under here anymore even if he tried, but he doesn't give it any attempts, just lets his fingers close over the lip of a cardboard box and he drags it out and...

He's met with Camden's comic book collection.

And that's what breaks Isaac. That's what gets the first tear spilling over his cheek. He wipes it away quickly, refuses to let it fall into the

box of plastic wrapped gems, of perfectly maintained fractures of Isaac's childhood, of his life before, of his *brother*.

Isaac doesn't know where to look. He doesn't know where to direct his eye line or his words, so he stares down at the box of comics, at the first edition Batman resting on top, and whispers, "So much has changed. I wish I could tell you everything."

Isaac squirms on the floor, shoves his legs out in front of him and leans his weight back against the wood of the bed frame, allows it to dig uncomfortably into his back, allows it to be a grounding point of contact

"I'm moving," Isaac says, just as quietly as before. "I'm leaving Beacon Hills and going to college with..." Isaac exhales, breathes in trembling, exhales again with, "my boyfriend."

He smiles despite himself. Because he *knows* that Cam would've loved Scott.

"He's something of a superhero," Isaac whispers. Because here, in Camden's childhood bedroom and in his childhood home, it only makes sense to share. It only makes sense to let those words meet the air with something like wonder in his voice, something like awe at the way things have turned out.

He feels *lucky*. And isn't that the funniest thing.

Because so many horrible things have happened in this house, so many horrible memories are rushing through Isaac's mind, but he's anchored in Scott and in Camden and in *now*.

Now, his future is open wide before him. Now, he's pretty sure he could do anything.

—

Isaac tucks the box of comics under his arm and moves to leave the room, but he's stopped in his tracks at the sight before him.

There, hanging on the back of the bedroom door, on a little hook and almost completely unnoticed, is a jacket.

But, when Isaac does notice it, his heart stops in his chest and shoots up to his throat as wetness springs to his eyes, a fresh wave of waterfall tears.

He remembers this jacket well. This big and sort of objectively ugly thing that Cam bought for himself, with his own money, right before his senior year of high school. He wore it almost every day that year, the last of Isaac's memories of him enrap in this stiff fabric and rust brown color.

Isaac assumed he had taken it with him when he deployed. He didn't think he'd ever see this thing again.

But here it is. Like it's been waiting for him all this time.

Isaac sets the box of comics down and takes it off the hook, wiping dust from the back and blaming the sting of his eyes on the small cloud that puffs up around him.

Isaac swallows and then holds it up to his nose, dips his face into the collar of this jacket. And there's something so faint there, something dulled with time but sharpened – *enhanced* – by werewolf senses.

Two tears roll down Isaac's cheeks then, pain escaping and flowing freely as he whispers into the neckline, "I miss you."

Isaac's not sure how long he stands there, breathing in the almost gone scent of his already gone brother. But, eventually, he comes back to himself, comes back to the present moment and the small time crunch of an appointment drawing nearer.

Isaac picks the box up again and settles the jacket over the crook of his elbow. Then, he closes Camden's bedroom door with a creaking of the hinges and a clicking of the latch in place.

He walks down the hall feeling raw and tired, like an open wound that keeps being reinforced, keeps getting split open again and again. And he searches for Parrish in the quiet of the house.

He finds him standing in front of the fireplace, staring at the mantle and the picture that rests at its center. There are tears in Parrish's eyes, sliding over his cheeks in silent pain and suffering.

Isaac sets the box down on the ground and moves to stand next to him. He looks up at the picture of Camden, the last one ever taken, the one in uniform with a small grin on his lips.

And, "you can keep that one," Isaac says.

Parrish blinks away from the photograph and over to Isaac. His eyes

are wide in shock and he's quickly shaking his head, saying, "No. I – I couldn't."

"Yes. You can," Isaac says. His own eyes flit to the side, to the stack of pictures waiting for him on the kitchen table. Then, he turns on Parrish with a sad smile, "This isn't how I remember Camden—" *and it's not how I want to either* –"so you should keep this one. I want you to have it."

Parrish pulls Isaac into a sudden hug, dragging him in with a quiet *oof!* and a collision of their bodies. Isaac hugs him back with a soft laugh in his throat, with something warm resting on his shoulders, something like gratitude and connection and *not alone*.

—

It's the same tattoo artist who did Scott's tattoo. It makes Isaac more pleased than it probably should, makes him happier than is probably warranted.

The shop is a little intimidating with its dark walls plastered with neon signs and drawings of dragons and swords and similarly daunting depictions. But it's easier with the company crowding the space, with Derek and Scott and Stiles all there with him.

"Do I really need to be here?" Stiles asks, staring at the tattoo needle with bugged out eyes and a frantic jumping of his hands at his sides.

Derek opens his mouth and Isaac knows he's going to say *no*, so he speaks over him with, "Yes. You were there for Scott's tattoo, so you have to be there for mine."

It's only partly a lie, though Isaac's heart stays even with the half truth of it. Part of Stiles' presence does come back to the repeating of history, to the creation of a pattern, to the four of them in the husk of the Hale house and the burning of two bands into Scott's skin. (Isaac doesn't remember it, too knocked out on anesthetic to be cognizant, but he knows he was there.)

But, more than that, it's about these three people in his life. Scott, his first love and his first showing of unconditional care and his first feeling of trust. Derek, his first alpha and his first chosen family and his first feeling of anchor. Stiles, his first best friend and his first uninhibited laughter and his first feeling of camaraderie.

The three of them mean so much to Isaac, so much that he can't

imagine doing this without them.

And so, they stay by his side as the decal is layered over the left side of his ribcage and the pressing of the needle begins.

—

The first part is easy. It passes with Stiles' boisterous complaints, Derek's silent comfort, and Scott's hand held in his with a not-so-subtle leeching of pain that the tattoo artist either doesn't notice or doesn't care to comment on.

The second part is less fun, less easy. The second part takes them into the parking garage of the loft with Stiles and Scott holding him down while Derek presses the flame of a familiar blow torch to the sensitive skin of his ribs – the same place where Derek's canine teeth once sunk in deep enough to bleed.

It burns, obviously. The pain laps at his skin and screams at his nerve endings as he lights with agony and grits his teeth so hard he's worried they might break right out of his mouth.

The scent of fire and charring skin hits his nose and almost makes him gag as he thrashes against the blaze, against the spasming affliction with a bucking of his hips and a throwing forward of his weight.

The tattoo needle had tickled a little, like an irritation that he couldn't scratch or subdue. But this flame of his flesh puts the sensation to shame. It stings and smarts. It's like a rushing, swooping sensation in Isaac's gut, a twisting of knots and fears. It runs through him like a wave of wildfire, like a million little scratches, like butterfly wings fanning the inferno of misery.

And Isaac wonders why no one asked him if he was sure about this, he wonders why no one tried to stop him, he wonders why Derek and Scott didn't *warn* him of this pain, he—

The blow torch clicks off and the whooshing of flame goes quiet and the pain drips out of Isaac's skin and into Scott's fingertips.

Isaac falls back against the chair – he doesn't know how it got here, but it was probably Derek's doing – and catches his breath. He blinks heavily and stretches his neck and pants with his mouth parted open.

He's pretty sure his eyes are wet with almost tears, but nobody says anything about them. Actually, for a long moment, no one says

anything at all.

And then, “Dude. It’s so fucking cool.”

Isaac looks up at Stiles, at the impressed gleam in his milky brown eyes and the quiver of a small smile there. He looks at Scott and Derek too, gets twin nods of approval, of agreement.

Then, he looks down at the tattoo burned into his skin. It’s a little pink around the edges with the still healing of scarred muscle, but, mostly, it looks perfect. It’s the intertwining forms of a triskele and two thick black bands, it’s the two symbols twisting together, circling each other in a forever connection of Isaac’s first pack and his second.

It’s a reminder of what was lost and a reminder of what was gained. It’s the perfect balance and the perfect mark of belonging, of pack, of family.

—

Stiles says goodbye to Scott first, and Isaac gives them their moment without protest or eavesdropping. Instead, he hangs back with Derek at the open trunk of his car and the familiar box of comics and stack of photographs inside. The jacket’s there too, but there’s a slight breeze and slight chill and Isaac grabs it without thinking, tucking his arms into the sleeves.

“Um,” Isaac says, gesturing towards the box as he adjusts the jacket on his shoulders. (It fits him the same way it fit Cam, a little too big and warm and making a scratching sound when he moves his arms.) “Shouldn’t that stuff be in the Jeep?”

Derek shakes his head. “No.” And, “Scott is driving the Jeep up to Davis and you’re riding with me. No questions asked.”

Isaac stares at him blankly for a good five seconds. Then, “What?”

“I said no—” Derek cuts himself off with a half aborted laugh, like he can’t quite tell if Isaac did that on purpose or not. (He did.) He sighs and tucks a hand onto Isaac’s shoulder and says, “Let me drive you to school one last time.”

Isaac stares at him a little more. “You’re going to help us move in, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Derek says simply.

Isaac smiles and feels his eyes sting a little with unshed tears, but he doesn't let them fall yet. He merely slides a little closer to Derek, a little further into the hand on his shoulder, like an arm wrapped around him. Derek squeezes him tight and Isaac lets them have this moment too.

Stiles interrupts the moment, of course. He doesn't have any care for subtlety or privacy, just says, "Come on. Let's get this over with."

Isaac laughs and pulls out from under Derek's arm, but he doesn't move to walk away. Instead, it's Derek that turns his back on them and moves to the front of the car, climbing into the driver's seat where he'll wait for Isaac to join him when he's ready.

For a long pause, only silence passes between Isaac and Stiles. For a long pause, they just stare at each other, like they don't know what to say, like they don't know how to do *this*.

"This is so stupid," Stiles says. Then, he grabs Isaac's arm and pulls him into a hug so fierce Isaac almost can't breathe. And, for half a second, he doesn't hug back. For half a second, he's caught off guard and stiff.

But then, his arms loop around Stiles' back and he hugs him so tight that Stiles actually does say, "Fragile human here, please don't crush me, I happen to like my internal organs intact, thanks."

And Isaac loosens his hold, but only barely.

He whispers into Stiles' shoulder, spine aching just a little with the way he's bending over, "I'm gonna miss you."

"I'll visit all the time," Stiles says back, which Isaac knows means, *I'll miss you too*.

They part without another word, without ever saying a proper goodbye. And, as they walk away, their shoulders brush in one searing point of contact, one gentle reminder of friendship.

Isaac climbs into the passenger side of Derek's car for one last ride to school. And maybe, just maybe, he cries a little as the shape of the loft disappears in the rearview.

The dorms at UC Davis are full now that it's the spring semester, so they got an apartment close to campus instead. It's on the second floor of an older brick building with a bronze 5 placard labeling the door.

There are two bedrooms – one with soft lilac walls and the other a pale butter yellow. They choose the yellow room as the main bedroom and, of course, Isaac is reminded of sunshine and Scott's smile. The smaller, floral room is fitted with a twin bed and a desk. They're naming it the guest bedroom, but there's an unspoken agreement that it's something more than that. It's something of an escape, a place for decompression and alone time. There's a second unspoken agreement that the space is Isaac's. Because he's fairly certain that Scott will never use it. And Isaac hopes he won't use it much either, but the gesture is nice and he appreciates the safety of it.

The non-bedrooms are a little more subtle in their color scheme with walls of faded tan and light cream. The kitchen is warm, if a little stale from the lack of natural light. The oven squeaks when it's opened and the fridge light flickers and flashes and won't stay on. The living room is similarly lit with lamps and overhead lights and decorated with pictures and a brown couch that's a little ugly, but a lot comfortable.

The paint colors in the apartment are a little weird and the appliances are noisy and don't work perfectly, but Scott calls it character and Isaac calls it perfect. Together, they call it home. And, together, with the help of Melissa and Derek, they move their boxes and bags inside with an easy efficiency.

And it's strange to be moving in with Scott like this. Because it isn't the first time they've lived together, but it's all so different the second time around.

This time, Isaac isn't here out of a last resort. This time, Isaac isn't dripping from the rain and in desperate need of a sliver of kindness. This time, Isaac hasn't been kicked out and told to leave without warning or explanation.

This time, it's a choice. This time, Isaac planned for this, Isaac *hoped* for this. This time, Derek is helping him carry boxes up the stairs or into the elevator. This time, Isaac isn't running *away* from something.

This time, Isaac is running toward the future he wants to build, the future he wants to forge with Scott.

This time, everything is different. Everything is *better*.

As the sun sinks beneath the horizon and paints the sky with shades of yellow and purple, it becomes time for Derek and Melissa to head back home.

Melissa is the first to leave, sharing in a long and emotional goodbye with Scott. Isaac can hear them both crying, can scent the pain in their chemosignals.

But, eventually, they calm and pull away and Isaac expects that to be it. Expects Melissa to wave and be on her way, but, instead, she pulls Isaac aside and hugs him too.

Isaac shakes into her embrace, into the strong arms of a mother and the gentle stroking of her hand over his back. She whispers into the hug, into the quiet space between them, “You know, I’m glad he has you. After Allison... I always hoped, but I – I wasn’t sure. And then, well, a mother’s intuition. I think I knew long before either of you did.”

Isaac laughs a little into the dark curls of her hair and the scent of her shampoo. And, he whispers back, a tint of amusement to his words, “No offense, Melissa, but I’m pretty sure everyone knew before we did.”

Melissa shares in his laugh and pulls back. She pats a hand on his shoulder and looks at him with flushed cheeks and red rimmed eyes. Then, she does smile and she does wave and she does leave out the front door.

And then, it’s Derek’s turn.

He lingers a little longer, a handful of minutes in the quietly new space of their apartment, until Isaac says, “I’ll walk you out.”

They ride the elevator together in silence. Isaac’s breath doesn’t hitch and his hands don’t shake. He’s perfectly calm in the enclosed space, perfectly fine in the entrapment of metal walls. And maybe there’s something more meaningful there, some symbol of his growth and how far he’s come, but Isaac doesn’t dwell on it.

Instead, he follows Derek out through the sliding doors and out down the steps of the building and out onto the sidewalk.

They’re still for a moment, just bracing for it side by side. And then, in

sync and on cue, they turn and fall into each other's arms, into the feeling of family and goodbye and the idea of missing someone while they're still standing right in front of you.

Isaac knows they're both crying. His lungs ache with the sobs of it, with the pain of this moment.

"I'm proud of you," Derek whispers.

And they've been here before. They've done this all once before, but they'll do it again and it'll feel more real this time. It feels more grounded in reality, grounded in the property line of Davis, California, beyond the stretch of the nemeton and the barriers of Beacon Hills.

And, he whispers back, "I'm proud of you too."

I'm proud of us, he thinks, but doesn't say. He doesn't have to, they both already know it, they're both already feeling it. This *pride* in their hearts. It's this feeling like everything's going to be okay. Even with so much unknown, they're confident in each other and in their bond and in this pack they've formed together, that they've passed between them.

The history between them is long and complicated. Isaac's certain that the future will be at least one of those things.

Derek pulls away and wipes at his eyes and stares at Isaac. There's something unsure in his forest eyes, something thinking and contemplative.

"Are you sure you want to give your room up for Theo Raeken?"

It's not at all what Isaac is expecting, but Derek is rubbing at the back of his neck a little awkward, a little nervous, like he's been waiting all day to bring this up, to broach this subject.

Getting an almost shy look in his eye, Derek adds, "I mean, I just – I don't want you to feel like you don't have a space to come home to."

Isaac grins at him, easy as anything, and says, "You've got a perfectly good couch."

—

Isaac takes the stairs back up to the second floor. Not because he has to, not because he can't handle the elevator, but because the open

space and the movement of his legs feels almost therapeutic in this moment. It gives him an extra set of seconds to come to a place of composure before the number 5 greets his view and he opens the door to his new home, to the place he's now living with Scott McCall.

Isaac locks the door behind him and sets his keys in a dish at the door. And then, he turns to look at Scott.

He's standing in the small space between the living room and the kitchen. He's staring at the wall and the set of pictures hung up there, a collection of family and pack and friendship, of those lost and those still among them.

Isaac walks up next to him and stands beside him, finds his hand without looking and lets them lace together. Scott squeezes idly at the scarred skin there, like an instinct or a reflex.

Scott's eyes are trained on a photo of Isaac and Camden. It's the last one ever taken of them, before Cam left for war and with that jacket on his frame, when Isaac was eleven and Camden was one year younger than Isaac is now.

"You do look a lot like him," Scott says. There's something reverent in his voice, something awed and quiet and... *happy*, almost.

Isaac looks down at himself, fiddles a little with the zipper of the jacket. He smiles and says, "Yeah. I guess I do."

Isaac glances up again. His eyes skate over the collage of memories, over the photo on the day of yearbook pictures, over a photo booth shot of Allison and Scott, over Corey and Mason and Isaac in the shelves of the comic store where Mason now works.

Isaac lets his eyes drag over this wall of memories and finds that... he feels happy too.

He pulls at Scott's hand and pulls him closer, into his arms and into a kiss.

—

That night, in their shared bed, in their shared home, Isaac is wrapped up in more than just Scott's arms. He's wrapped up in belonging, in safety, in meant to be. There, together, Scott's heartbeat lulls him under the surface of wake. It guides him.

Isaac falls into sleep like falling into love.

It's a steady, gradual thing. Isaac slips into unconsciousness with an undeniable feeling of *trust*.

Chapter End Notes

A drawing of [Isaac's tattoo](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!